

Evaluation Capacity Building through an Online Community

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EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING

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Abstract

Research in early childhood development (ECD) stresses the importance of the early years of development as critical for long-term learning and development. Healthy experiences in the early years create a foundation for a lifetime of positive outcomes. To promote the continued improvement and evolution of ECD the necessity for evaluation of practices and programs is critical. The purpose of this project is to understand the communication needs of ECD stakeholders involved in evaluation, by exploring the various online methods they use for educating themselves about evaluation, communicating about evaluation, and collaborating for evaluation. This project is explored through the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN) through the University of Alberta (UofA).

A quantitative survey was sent out to over 225 participants In June of 2016. Participants were asked questions about their learning, PD delivery, and online education preferences. Findings revealed that despite age differences and education levels among participants, overall they preferred face-to-face methods. Despite these preferences they did indicate that they do use online methods such as websites and webinars to explore information on evaluation in ECD.

While PD preferences tended to be face to face, it is still important to consider online approaches as they decrease the barriers of time, money and geography. Online communities provide opportunities for interactivity, for collaboration through learning and sharing of information, and for becoming part of a social network. Given the benefits of online approaches it is important for the ECN to create an online community that is interactive and participatory as they move forward in supporting evaluation capacity

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building in ECD. Preferences in learning from the survey will provide direction as to strategies used to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The field of early childhood development (ECD) has evolved and changed significantly over the last few decades. Researchers, building on findings since the 80s, confirm the critical importance of the early years for long-term learning and development (Alexander & Ignjatovic, 2012; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Providing children with early supports can prevent negative outcomes and promote long-term positive development in health, cognitive, social, behavioral and academic domains. Healthy experiences in the early years create a foundation for a lifetime of positive outcomes. Policy and service initiatives, which promote development during the first five years of life, are recognized to be highly cost-effective, as they can reduce expensive interventions in later years when issues such as learning and behavior problems, and chronic disease manifest (Alexander & Ignjatovic, 2012; McCain et al., 2007).

To support these initiatives and promote the continuation of the improvement and evolution of ECD the necessity for evaluation of practices and programs is critical. “To evaluate something means determining its merit, worth, value, or significance” (Patton, 2012, p.3). Evaluation should be more than the production of a report; it should inform thought and action. The act of using evaluation is referred to as utilization-focused evaluation, which is both personal and situational. Patton (2012) discusses evaluation as, “a process for helping primary intended users select the most appropriate content, model, methods, theory, and uses for their particular situation” (Patton, p. 5). A large part of selecting, based on these criteria, involves building program and organizational readiness

and capacity for evaluation. To do and use evaluation in ways that are both rigorous and meaningful, the need to build capacity for evaluation is imperative. Evaluation capacity building “is an intentional process to increase individual motivation, knowledge, and skills, and to enhance a group or organizations ability to conduct or use evaluation” (Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012, p. 308). Effective use of evaluation is necessary to maintain and build on the positive changes within ECD and facilitates accountability, program development and staff development. With strong initiatives such as Success by Six in Canada and Race to the Top in the U.S., there is a push for programs to ensure highly qualified staff are meeting the needs of all children, and to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders (Reinking, 2015). Accountability includes evaluations that prove to funders that their money is well spent, to parents that their children are well cared for, and to all stakeholders that ECD is essential and worthwhile. An example of evaluation might be to look at educational outcomes to prove that programming is effective or to identify gaps or areas for improvement. Through evaluation, staff education and qualifications may be indicated as an area for improvement, requiring increased training and professional development (PD) for employees.

There are a variety of ways to motivate, increase knowledge, skills and abilities to conduct and use evaluation, which include PD opportunities and formal education (e.g., certificates, degrees). These methods can be costly both in time and money, particularly for those living in remote areas. The more recent delivery of online methods to bring people together includes online formal courses, workshops, discussion forums, and the use of various social media platforms. The purpose of this project is to understand the

communication needs of the ECD stakeholders that are involved in evaluation, by exploring the various online methods ECD stakeholders' use for educating themselves about evaluation, communicating about evaluation, and collaborating for evaluation. The project is explored through an existing network, the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN) through the University of Alberta (UofA).

To begin, background information on the importance of ECD and the need to build capacity for evaluation will be described. As this topic is explored through ECN, a brief history and the goals and objectives of the network will be explored.

Background

Decades of research in ECD have provided valuable information in regards to determining future success of children, implications for programming, and insight into poverty reduction. Healthy experiences in the early years create a foundation for a lifetime of positive outcomes. For disadvantaged children, developmental gaps can emerge early as living in poverty may create barriers such as poor access to health care, poor access to quality childcare or early education programs, lack of basic needs such as food and shelter, and fewer opportunities to emulate positive role models (Dougherty, 2014). “Environments for young children should always reflect concern for all aspects of child development; physical, intellectual, social, and emotional” (Jalongo et al., 2004, p. 144). Some of the supports and resources that need to be in place to promote healthy early childhood development include strong family connections, safe and nurturing homes, quality accessible and affordable early learning and care programs, parent support and family programming, and accessible healthcare (Dougherty, 2014; Jalongo et al., 2004).

Children require support from a network of individuals, programs, and agencies. A major challenge in Alberta is to create an ECD system that supports stakeholders' efforts and improve outcomes for children. Canadian provinces and territories have been focusing on funding initiatives that produce documentation and improve ECD outcomes (e.g., Early Childhood Mapping Project, 2014; Together we raise tomorrow, Government of Alberta, 2013b; Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013), yet there still remains a need to prove program and service effectiveness. There is motivation on the part of community agencies to increase their capacity for evaluation to show impact and justify support, but are often limited by time, expertise, funding, and the requirement for diverse outcome measures (Evaluation Capacity Network, 2015).

The need for increased capacity and resources in evaluation prompted the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) in the Faculty of Extension (University of Alberta) to explore the necessity of developing a partnership among sectors involved in promoting and supporting ECD. Focus groups with university and community partners were held in 2012, which identified differences in perspectives and understanding of evaluation among community agencies, government, university partners, and academics. The findings indicated that community agencies tend to find evaluation challenging in similar ways. Funders request evaluation methods and outcomes to meet their need to justify funding but these evaluations may not support the values and needs of programs. The lack of appropriate outcomes from evaluation is uninformative for program development and practice, making it difficult to provide resources and capacity to agencies. All participants agreed that dialogue and coordinated services are necessary in supporting evaluation. A central space where

stakeholders can access information and resources about evaluation is necessary in building capacity for evaluation in ECD (Bisanz, Edwards & Shaw, 2012).

Discussion with a variety of stakeholders who saw evaluation as valuable and challenging in ECD lead to the development of the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN). To address the challenges and understand the potential of evaluation, the ECN aims to bring stakeholders together to collectively advance evaluation practices in the field of ECD. The ECN is a growing partnership of over 20 organizations that represent not-for-profit organizations, government, funders, evaluators, and academics. Currently the ECN is funded for 3-years (2014-2017) through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grant, partner contributions, and a Mitacs postdoctoral fellowship (Evaluation Capacity Network, 2015).

“The overall goal of the ECN is to build a provincial, multidisciplinary, and inter sectoral partnership focused on enhancing evaluation capacity, and aligning evaluative thinking in the field of early childhood development” (Gokiert & Kingsley, 2016, Project overview, para.1). Knowledge about policies, practice and programming will be mobilized through the network by: supporting dialogue and understanding of language and perspectives on evaluation, serving as a central hub for evaluation support for all, advancing development of consistent measures and opportunities for program evaluation in ECD, and providing and creating common expectations and measures for program evaluation. The main focus is to enhance dialogue and build capacity among all stakeholders in ECD.

When engaging in dialogue around evaluation - it's importance, value or outcomes - tensions can exist among individuals, organizations, funders and service

users. For example, evaluation may be used for different purposes (accountability vs. learning), stakeholders have widely varying experience with evaluation, and evaluation terminology differs depending on the context. In addition, the evaluation requested by funding agencies might not always be useful for improving the provision of programs and services.

The ECN strives to connect this diverse community in order to bridge the gaps and promote learning through shared practices and approaches. Engaging in open dialogue is essential to understanding the impacts each discipline has on ECD, creating an opportunity to align resources and collectively make decisions on how to best support young children.

This background provides context for the literature review, which will include exploring evaluation capacity, reviewing professional development as a method for building capacity, and exploring the use of online communities as a setting to build capacity and foster knowledge sharing. The literature review is followed by a description of the process of developing a communication plan and implementation strategy for the ECN, and the creation of their blog. Chapter three will detail the survey methodology used to engage the members of the ECN to share the ways in which they learn and access information online. The findings of the survey will be presented followed by a discussion of the findings within the literature on building online communities, and more specifically the theoretical framework of Wenger's social learning theory and constructivism. The document will conclude with a summary of the key findings, recommendations for the ECN on building an online community, and implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review will explore three main areas: (1) evaluation and evaluation capacity building with a particular focus on early childhood development (ECD); (2) online communities including development, implementation, sustainability, and success; and (3) online professional development (PD) or learning as a key component or outcome of engaging in an online community.

Evaluation

“To evaluate something means determining its merit, worth, value, or significance” (Patton, p.5). Evaluation is about knowing and doing, and answers the questions: what? so what? and now what? Evaluation is important in ECD because it can support all stakeholders in providing the best quality care for children.

There is considerable literature and numerous organizations that advocate for increasing the quantity and improving quality of ECD initiatives through evaluation (Araujo, 2015; Best & Cohen, 2013; Jalongo et al., 2004). Evaluation, and evaluation capacity literature, specific to ECD includes reasons for conducting evaluation, improvements in current evaluation methods, and building capacity for ECD stakeholders to participate in, conduct, and use evaluation findings.

Evaluation is necessary for a variety of reasons, including accountability to funders, improvement of programming, and advocating for further staff education (Araujo, 2015; Gilliam & Leiter, 2003). ECD programs and initiatives are often funded through government, foundations or corporate grants, which require evaluation of program effectiveness and cost effectiveness as accountability measures. Accountability is “the obligation of an individual or organization to account for its activities, accept

responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner. It also includes the responsibility for money or other entrusted property” (Accountability, n.d.). Accountability systems often focus on measureable outcomes that are quantitative in nature (e.g., number of participants, satisfaction rates, test scores) and require a short time frame. Jalongo et al. (2004) stresses the need for qualitative contributions, not only reports through statistics but also looking at programs from an interactive case study perspective. Evaluation that focuses strictly on numbers and scoring provides only half the information necessary for demonstrating accountability. Evaluation for accountability looks at observation, feedback, and self-reflection creating a thorough and transparent accountability system (Dougherty, 2014; Lennie, Tacchi, Wilmore, & Koirala, 2015; Reinking, 2015).

It is difficult to separate accountability from improved programming, as the quality or outcomes of programming may impact justification for further or continued funds. Depending on what funders require for accountability, the type and use of the evaluation varies. For example, if there is a need to prove quality care then evaluation will likely focus on process, explaining what the program did. If the goal of evaluation is to establish continued funding then an evaluation describing the impact of programming might be more effective. Ultimately, it is the quality and use of evaluation methods that determine both accountability and programming (Reinking, 2015).

Evaluations in ECD focused on demonstrating the impact of programming are intended to find out what is and is not working and to establish areas for improvement and/or expansion. These evaluations suggest the need for high-quality ECD environments that follow sound philosophies, reflect on practice and continue to improve services

(Jalongo et al., 2004). This need for accountability and cost-effectiveness must reflect both immediate and long-term effectiveness. Recognizing the cost-effectiveness of early intervention for long-term learning and health outcomes for children, organizations and funders are directing their energies towards ECD (Alexander & Ignjatovic, 2013; McCain et al., 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Just this year, in 2016, select elementary schools in Edmonton, Alberta offer pre-Kindergarten programs (Edmonton Public Schools, 2013). The inclusion of Kindergarten and pre-kindergarten in schools is a good example of evaluation results showing a need, resulting in more resources being channeled to ECD (Soracho, 2015). In turn, this expansion of programs has prompted a closer look at the quality and evaluation of programming and resources that support ECD, including the need for further education and professional development (PD) for ECD professionals.

Evaluation findings that call for improvements can assist in advocating for continued educational and PD opportunities for ECD professionals (Best & Cohen, 2013; Gilliam & Leiter, 2003). When programs show gaps in performance, increased funds may be allocated for PD. Part of professional development includes appropriate training and techniques to work with children and improve programming but must also include the necessity of reflective practice and ongoing evaluation of program effectiveness. This training should also build capacity for evaluation by increasing knowledge about research and data, and understanding the importance of ongoing assessment and evaluation (Best & Cohen, 2013).

In line with the proposed approach described above, Bakken, Nunez, and Couture (2014) stress the importance of organizations becoming learning environments where dialogue and sharing about evaluation are ongoing. This requires moving beyond

gathering data on children (i.e., standardized testing) to determine ECD program effectiveness, to an engagement of all stakeholders in a broader more interactive view of evaluation (Soracho, 2015). Individuals and organizations in the field of ECD are expected to contribute to, and use evaluations, however they are lacking skills, knowledge and resources to do so. For this reasons, evaluation capacity building is critical.

Evaluation Capacity Building

“Evaluation capacity building is an intentional process to increase individual motivation, knowledge, and skills, and to enhance a group or organization’s ability to conduct or use evaluation” (Labin et al., 2012, p.308). Evaluation capacity building has received recent attention, promoting evaluation as a profession and as an important part of organizational learning. Through the synthesis of a range of evaluation capacity building literature it is apparent that individuals and organizations need to not only do evaluation but also use it in meaningful ways, provide opportunities for learning around evaluation, and provide ongoing evaluation capacity building efforts. To ensure these outcomes are possible a number of readiness factors such as organizational capacity, leadership, culture and funding need to be present (Labin, 2014).

Cousins, Goh, Elliott, and Bourgeois (2014) describe doing evaluation as professionals developing evaluation competencies in their practice through careful delivery of pre-service and in-service training. Having trained people who understand the process of evaluation, the skills to effectively conduct evaluations, can lead to increased appropriate use of the results for program change and improvement.

Using evaluation “reflects the nature of and extent to which evaluation use and influence occurs within the organization” (Cousins et al., 2014, p.17). Use of findings to support decisions about programming, improvements, or as proof of effectiveness must be conscious and planned. In addition, considerable learning occurs from the process of participating in an evaluation, through relationship building and involvement in the process (Cousins et al., 2014). For effective use of findings organizations must be knowledgeable about evaluation, have strong leadership, and promote a culture where collaboration and support occurs.

A large part of evaluation capacity building comes back to the reasons we evaluate, or what Preskill and Boyle (2008) refer to as the “trigger” for developing capacity for evaluation in organizations. Organizations often determine why they need evaluation, and then leadership implements their strategies from within. Employees may view evaluation as a daunting task that takes time away from regular duties, is difficult to do, and produces ambiguous results. Evaluations are sometimes imposed, by funders or government, which can increase workload for program implementers (Gilliam & Leiter, 2003). Creating a more collaborative and interactive approach, as noted by Araujo (2015) earlier, increases ownership and buy-in among participants.

Being clear about what is being evaluated, how it is being evaluated, what the evaluation will be used for, and the benefits of taking part in evaluation are crucial in understanding and participating in the process (Gilliam & Leiter, 2003; Saracho, 2015). Hodgson, Papatheodorou, and James (2014) describe the positive benefits of a participatory and collaborative evaluation through a case study of an ECD program. Results found that being involved in evaluation made staff more aware of what was

expected of them and lead to voluntary participation in self-reflection. Through this process they determined a need for and received additional resources and training to strengthen their practice.

One strategy to ensure collaboration and understanding is to have a trained position to assist with monitoring and evaluation (Gilliam & Leiter, 2003). Preskill and Boyle (2008) present a model for evaluation capacity building which connects the need for evaluation knowledge, skills and attitudes with sustainable evaluation practice. They suggest a variety of strategies for teaching and learning about evaluation capacity building, which account for different learning styles. The design of the evaluation takes into account these learning styles but must also consider the organization's available resources, organizational change theories, communication methods, and culture. This learning and skill is only effective if it is transferred into a sustainable evaluation practice which includes using findings appropriately, planning for evaluation, and continuous learning about evaluation. The model is complex and requires a key player, the facilitator, to connect all aspects of the model and monitor its success (Preskill & Boyle, 2008).

While evaluation will continue to be an area whereby significant capacity needs to be developed in the field of ECD, evaluations that are conducted thoughtfully and in collaboration with participants can increase understanding and use of evaluation outcomes (Saracho, 2015). "The ultimate goal of evaluation capacity building is sustainable evaluation practice – where members continuously ask questions that matter, collect, analyze, and interpret data, and use evaluation findings for decision-making and action" (Preskill & Boyle, 2008, p.444). Building a community of evaluation practitioners is one approach to sustainability. Communities come together in various

ways to share; with the assistance of technology the barriers of time and space are reduced, making coming together much less of a struggle. An online community may serve as an ideal venue for evaluation capacity building, creating and sustaining a community of knowledge, sharing, and PD around evaluation.

Online Communities

An important aspect of building capacity around evaluation is facilitating dialogue amongst stakeholders. How can interested parties discuss, share information, and learn from each other to build evaluation capacity within ECD? Methods such as meetings, professional development sessions, and onsite coaching are great examples, however they are limited because of the face-to-face requirement. Technology, on the other hand, is increasingly used for learning, sharing information and reducing geographical boundaries. One particular online strategy for building evaluation capacity in ECD is through the use of online communities.

An online community is a group of people who come together virtually through “various forms of computer-mediated communications” (Han, Hou, Kim, & Gustafson, 2014, p. 911) to interact, cooperate, collaborate, learn and grow based on a shared purpose, obtaining support, advice or exchanging information. The users share a core set of values and interests and a strong set of secondary connections. Participants demonstrate various levels of personal participation and organic engagement with the community over a period of time that they determine (Howard, 2010; Kraut & Resnick, 2011).

Theory

The process of building capacity for evaluation in ECD can be accomplished through the use of online communities as a hub for dialogue, sharing information, and expanding PD. Much of the literature on the development, implementation and study of online communities, evaluation capacity building, and PD use connectivism learning theory (Dron & Anderson, 2014). Anderson and Dron (2011) review three generations of online education pedagogy: cognitive-behaviorism, constructivism, and connectivism.

Cognitive-behaviorism views the learner's beliefs and thoughts as having a direct effect on their behavior and emotions. Learning is viewed as an individual process with set objectives the learner fulfills on their own. This theory was particularly relevant prior to the use of computers and Internet and fit well with learning through mass media, print and mail (Dron & Anderson, 2014).

Constructivism views the learner as part of a group that discusses, creates and constructs knowledge with a teacher or leader. Vygotsky, one of the main contributors to constructivism, "saw development as a social relationship through which children collaborate with others who are more experienced" (Kail & Zolner, 2015, p. 247). When acquiring new skills learners look to other people who are more knowledgeable for assistance and work with them, placing the process of learning above the actual content of what is being learned. Constructivism pedagogy developed at the same time as technology that moved beyond one-way transmission of information and allowed for synchronous and asynchronous interactions between learners and teachers (e.g., a guided online conference with a discussion leader) (Dron & Anderson, 2014).

Connectivism involves social networks where learners explore, connect, create and evaluate within a network. People and individuals as part of organizations crave interaction and learn best through the co-construction of knowledge. This pedagogical approach stresses social presence and social capital within the network.

Connectivism learning theory includes a number of approaches that have evolved with technology: communities of practice, followed by networks of practice, and finally connectivism. Communities of practice emerged out of Wenger's Social Learning theory, which focuses on "learning as a social process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Illeris, 2009, p. 210). The community of practice involves learning through the process of actively participating in communities by doing, belonging, becoming and experiencing through interaction. Wenger (2010) states, "identities come to reflect the landscape in which we live and our experience in it" (p.5).

Networks of practice take communities of practice to another level, distinguishing between groups that intentionally come together with the looser world of network connections. The connections link individuals together, as well as machines and resources, recognizing learning occurs in non-human appliances.

Communities of practice and networks of practice are the most relevant approaches when discussing the creation of online communities, which seek to take online communication to a new level of networking, enabling active participation through the way individuals interact and share information. Connectivism takes these approaches and extends the learning beyond just participation. "Connectivism values capacity over

what is currently known and proposes students learn how and what to learn and have input into this process” (Dron & Anderson, 2014, p.59).

Connectivism creates a social network of learning, sharing and self-sufficiency within an online community. The social presence within the online interaction is not lost because as members leave the community their contributions remain (i.e., comments on twitter or Facebook). Each members contribution shapes the collective that emerges and shifts (Dron & Anderson, 2014). This social presence does not simply emerge with the building of an online community; careful consideration must be given to the construction of the community.

Developing, Implementing and Sustaining Online Communities

Howard (2010), and Kraut and Resnick (2011) have provided exceptional reference materials on the development, implementation, and sustainability of online communities. Howard, in particular provides practical information on how online communities work, why organizations should invest in them, what they may gain from being part of one, how to influence members, how to create a sense of belonging, and the significance of membership. Additionally, Kraut and Resnick explore and provide guidance on how to build and sustain thriving online communities. They highlight specific design challenges across the areas of contribution, commitment, regulation, newcomers, and startup. Each of these design challenges is discussed based on eight levers of change (design alternatives), which include community structure, content and activity, selecting and sorting, external communication, feedback and rewards, roles and rules, access controls, and presentation and framing (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). An important point to remember is that online communities take time to develop and grow,

and must comprise relevant information, promote collaboration and interdependency, and support values and behaviors that co-construct knowledge (Owen, 2014).

In order to gain a fuller understanding of online communities, the next section will explore some of the areas noted above by Howard, and Kraut and Resnick. First, the reasons people use online communities including benefits will be explored. Next, the design areas outlined by Kraut & Resnick, will be unpacked paying particular attention to start-up, contribution and commitment, with mention of Howard's suggestions related to structure. Lastly, possible platforms to use for online communities and how to choose the most appropriate for the needs of an organization will be discussed.

Why use an online community? There are a number of reasons or benefits of using online communities, including opportunities to collaborate through learning and sharing of information, becoming part of a social network, and to receive advice and support from others. As well, time is saved when searching for resources; there is an increased knowledge base, and the ability for asynchronous participation of members (Hanewald & Gesthuizen, 2009; Kraut & Resnick, 2011).

Part of capacity building is the learning and sharing of information around a topic. This is typically done through meetings, conference calls, PD, or formal education. Online communities create an alternative way to accomplish all of these, including saving time and participating asynchronously. For some, meeting online provides a safe space for discussion by placing all participants on a perceived even playing field, and encouraging those who are less likely to speak in a large group to share their voice and opinions. Hur and Brush (2009), through a case study of an online community, found through interviews and analyzing postings five dominant reasons for participating

including sharing emotion, lack of judgment in online environments, reducing isolation, exploring ideas, and experiencing a sense of community. Teaching or working in early childhood environments can be an isolating experience, even for those in large centers, as the time with children far outweighs planning and collaborating time (Krish, Ming, Wah, Nambiar, & Ya'acob, 2012). The use of the online community allows participants to discuss, share and learn in their own time in a collaborative and safe environment.

Creating an effective online community. There are various online communities in existence, many of which are not sustained and never reach critical mass (large enough to sustain itself). There are a number of strategies for successful development of an online community such as starting a new community, encouraging contribution, encouraging commitment, and regulating behavior. Across these strategies, there are two common themes: creating connections and developing relationships among community members, and the need for a moderator or facilitator.

Key elements that are crucial to building sustainable online communities include relationship building, risk-taking, and sharing personal experiences (Barber, Taylor, & Buchanan, 2014; Kraut & Resnick, 2011). Online communities need to have a domain (common interest), sense of community (relationships), and activity (interaction) (Barber et al., 2014; Howard, 2010).

To be successful, organizations must have commitment and the financial and human resources to start and maintain the community. A large part of this is the use of a moderator who asks questions, prompts discussion, welcomes people, and monitors membership and content. Other terms used interchangeably to describe the moderator include teacher, administrator, manager, or facilitator. This person(s) may or may not be

the developer of the community and may/may not be paid, but are critical in initiating and developing the culture and success of the community. Their presence is particularly important in the early days of the online community and may decrease as members become more committed and take on some of the moderator roles (Howard, 2010; Kraut & Resnick, 2011).

As the community moves through its lifecycle of inception, establishment and maturity, Young (2013) outlines various tactics for a community moderator to follow. These include proactively initiating and maintaining growth through outreach, encouraging member referrals, ensuring regular activity, hosting events, creating content, gathering data and feedback, and fostering a sense of community (Howard, 2010; Kraut & Resnick, 2011). The role takes on one of facilitator/moderator vs. a teacher, who guides discussion and behavior (Gao, 2014; Garrison, 2007). Although the role changes, their presence is still essential. Garrison (2007), through his exploration of issues on social, cognitive, and teaching presence in online communities, found that the role moved from providing personal support to facilitating group cohesion, moving discussion beyond exploring, and shifting the way teaching presence is perceived. The moderator/facilitator must facilitate dialogue and state expectations for conversation to progress toward a collaborative end (Garrison, 2007). It was noted that although participants appreciated a moderator or mentor within their community, most preferred it not be a supervisor or someone in a position of power (Kyzar et al., 2014).

Related to the role of the facilitator are the tactics that can be used to encourage contribution and commitment to the community, regulate behavior, and attract and maintain new members. These may include asking members questions, giving them tasks

to perform, offering rewards for behavior, sharing information, asking for their opinion, and connecting them with other members who are similar to them. All of these build community, creating a safe atmosphere for taking risks and sharing with other members (Howard, 2010; Kraut & Resnick, 2011).

Contribution. Key aspects of community include interaction, cooperation, collaboration, support, advice and exchanging information. If members of an online community are not contributing to the community there will be little exchange, collaboration or interaction. This makes contribution a critical component in developing a successful online community (Kraut & Resnick, 2011; Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014).

Contribution to communities can be determined through a number of design criteria including but not limited to: selecting, sorting and highlighting information, framing information, and providing feedback and rewards (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). “Empirical research suggests that a major obstacle to community success is engaging community members; the majority of people who visit online communities contribute little and leave quickly” (Ren et al., 2012, p. 242). Resistance to participation is related to trust and contribution, as some members are uncomfortable posting information or asking questions that make them vulnerable (i.e., teachers discussing their worst lessons) and find it difficult to provide constructive criticism to others (Krish et al., 2012).

In order to attempt to get people to stay in an online community it is necessary to create “what Lave and Wenger (1991) term the process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ where by new members can observe and learn vicariously before becoming an increasingly active contributor as their knowledge and confidence grows” (Gray & Smyth, 2012, p. 60) The facilitator/teacher of the community may need to become more

involved in discussions and use strategies, such as directed facilitation, that promote more active involvement and a greater sense of community (Garrison, 2007).

Effective online communities have moderators who influence the flow, help establish rules, and model expected behavior by leading in contribution to the community. Kraut & Resnick (2011) discuss the roles moderators' play in encouraging contributions from others in the community. These include ensuring the tools within the platform are easy to use and/or find. Individuals are quick to leave a community if it is difficult to navigate. The site must also show that other members are contributing because of the benefits of being a member. An example of this would be to post influential members comments about what they have gained from being a member. Members also like to feel useful; requesting simple tasks and offering reinforcement for accomplishing tasks is another strategy for contribution. Rewards are a form of motivation and attempt to attract different members. A variety of rewards should be used that appeal to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Badges or a point system might be used to appeal to individuals who like extrinsic rewards, while those motivated by intrinsic rewards might need a task to complete that provides a sense of satisfaction (Kraut & Resnick, 2011).

Other factors that affect contribution include the size of the community and feeling connected and supported. The purpose of the community has an impact on how connected and supported individuals desire to be and how large the community is. For example an online community for basketball fans could have large numbers of people who feel connected to each other and have a strong sense of camaraderie. An online group for breast cancer survivors may need to stay smaller and require members to show more empathy and understanding so members feel connected and supported. Jaggars,

Edgecombe, and Stacey (2013) found that students reported a sense of caring when teachers actively engaged with them online, in fact interpersonal interaction in many studies was indicated as the most important community quality factor (Jaggars et al., 2013). Gray and Smyth (2012) found that group size could enhance or discourage engagement. For some participants if the group grows too large their personal connections to members might be sacrificed, causing them to leave the group. “There was a strong sense from the general evaluation that small groups with a clear focus around a narrow set of clear shared objectives were proving to be the most effective and productive....” (Gray & Smyth, p. 74).

Commitment. Commitment is closely related to contribution in the sense that if people are committed to a community they are more likely to contribute. Yet continuous contribution to a community often results in fuller commitment. The two are intertwined and both are essential.

There are various reasons individuals commit to an online community, ranging from having strong feelings about the topic of the community to committing because of a close relationship to the founder of the community. Kraut and Resnick (2011) summarize types of commitment as affective commitment, based on attachment or feelings of closeness to members or individuals; normative commitment, based on obligation or feelings of rightness; and need-based or continuance commitment, based on incentives or benefits for staying in the group. The types contribute to an individual’s decision to continue with the community. Depending on the purpose of the community some types of commitment might have a stronger influence on the decision.

Commitment to online communities can be encouraged through the same design alternatives as contribution, looking at the community structured, how is it framed and presented, and what methods are used to select, sort and filter information (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). Commitment increases when members have an identity within the group and have created bonds with others. In his exploration of social presence within an online community, Garrison (2007) states that open communication, group cohesion, risk-free expression, and encouragement of collaboration are essential. Along with social presence it is necessary to have cognitive presence where information is exchanged, ideas are connected and solutions to issues emerge. All of this can happen, but not without a teaching (facilitation) presence; an individual(s) who facilitates discourse, focuses discussions, and shares personal meaning (Garrison, 2007; Kraut & Resnick, 2011). Hanewald and Gesthuizen (2009) found that an online mailing list created a community of users who shared resources, discussed lessons, and shared experiences contributing to their feelings of community, confidence and competence.

The teachers in this study believed that the best way to encourage others to join the mailing list included modeling good mailing list behavior, personally extending an invitation.... A good mailing list participant is somebody who is prepared and willing to share their work, while initiating and engaging in a positive and diplomatic online debate (p.40).

The usefulness (content) of a community and the sense of community are important factors in determining if participants will continue to use the community (Tsai, 2012).

Despite encouragement to commit to a community, people still leave. There is, however, still value in all connections regardless how short lived, providing valuable

learning for the community (Mackey & Evans, 2011). Members play different roles such as the “lurker” who reads and gathers information, and the “contributor” who comments and writes content. The lurker (person with weak ties to the community) is still valuable however, as they leave behind data that indicates to the contributors (who write content) what kinds of information are useful and of value (Liu, Wagner & Chen, 2014). This draws attention to online communities as a central place to share, with new members joining and others leaving as the community changes and evolves (Kraut & Resnick, 2011).

Appropriate technology. Evans (2015) illustrates how the technology that is used for an online community can be equally important to the people using it and their roles within the group. The organization of forums/discussions in an online community is essential, but must be organized with appropriate labels to guide participants (Gao, 2014). The willingness to take more risk increases as participant’s confidence and competence with the online tools increased. There are many types of online platforms to use in creating an online community, but regardless of the platform used the key elements of trust, sharing, interaction, collaboration, and reflection must be present (Shengbo, Shuang & Hongtao, 2012).

Online communities can serve as valuable platforms where members can share information, learn, and collaborate. Through a qualitative case study Krish et al. (2012) found that participating in a blogging community increased member’s sense of self as creators of knowledge and not simply consumers of information and also served as a valuable source of professional development. Online communities serve as useful

platforms to provide professional development and dialogue in order to enhance capacity for evaluation in ECD.

Professional Development (PD)

Before discussing the use of an online community to serve as a method of delivering PD a few terms need to be defined. Key terms that are used to describe people coming together to learn around a shared topic of interest and share ideas include: Professional Learning Communities & Communities of Practice. Although the two terms have some differences we will concentrate on their similarities and the use of online communities to meet the needs of both. Professional learning communities (PLC) serve as a space for professionals to get together to exchange ideas and learn from each other, contributing to their PD (Blitz, 2013). Communities of practice are groups of people who come together around a common interest or passion and meet regularly to share and learn more about the topic. An online community can serve as the space for coming together and sharing and thus contributing to the PD of the members.

For the purposes of this project, professional development is defined as training, education, or learning within workplaces, at conferences or through informal learning opportunities with the intention of improving skills, knowledge and competencies in a profession (Wikipedia, 2016). The use of online communities as professional development facilitates evaluation capacity building in ECD. I will briefly explore literature on PD with the strongest emphasis on literature that pertains to online learning communities. The exploration around online PD for teachers can help in understanding online methods and provide guidelines for use.

Online Communities – Decreasing barriers to effective PD. Professional development is valuable in any occupation, and is useful in keeping individuals up to date with the latest advancements and trends, enhancing personal growth, and providing them with resources to keep their work interesting and current. In keeping with constructivism and connectivism theories, interactive and cooperative PD is essential for optimum learning.

The field of education, including ECD, can be a very isolating career as much time is spent in the classroom and less time is spent on PD and collaboration with other professionals (Snider, 2009). When there is time for PD it often comes in the form of onetime workshops or training instead of well-planned PD that offers ongoing support and evaluation. Barriers to accessing PD include increasing cost, a decrease in professional development funds, isolation of some professionals, and the cost of time needed to attend (Blitz, 2013; Broadley, 2012; Hur & Brush, 2009). The use of online PD has the potential to decrease cost, increase access and sustain interactive communities that continue over time.

A caution in the use of online communities for PD is the lack of contribution and encouragement of others to contribute, which may be attributed to online individuals feeling isolated (Blitz, 2013). This information coincides with findings that rural teachers, already feeling isolated, did not use online communities as much as expected (Snider, 2009). Educators, particularly in remote or rural areas, are in need of online communities for PD that create a sense of belonging.

Through online communities the needs of all members must be met to facilitate commitment and contribution to the community. A large part of online community

success is attributed to the presence of an online facilitator and access to technical support (Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008). Kraut & Resnick's (2011) claim that encouraging people to contribute is necessary on the part of a moderator, at least initially when the community is starting, and probably more importantly when engaging those in isolation. A moderator can take steps to encourage contribution, such as asking questions, stressing the benefits of contribution, and offering small rewards for task completion. The more individual's feel connected to the community the more they contribute and partake in meaningful PD.

A moderator can help members feel welcome but one cannot assume that people who are in remote areas will easily and willingly use online resources. Snider (2009) found that isolated rural teachers did not utilize online communities for PD due to lack of time, on-line support, and training. Without support and training on the technology used, it is difficult for users to see the time saving benefits of online PD, as more time is spent learning the technology (Snider, 2009). It is essential that this training and support be ongoing (Forbes, 2015).

Meaningful PD Through Online Communities

A large advantage of online professional learning communities is their asynchronous nature, providing the user with the ability to find and share information at their convenience. Online communities are also reported to be better at promoting self-reflection than face-to-face communities (Blitz, 2013). Many individuals are more comfortable sharing career challenges online than they are face-to-face with colleagues in their own workplace. There is a sense of safety in asking for help or information when there is no direct connection to the workplace. The skills and expertise of members in an

online community may be much larger than in a physical workspace, creating unique ways for individual members to grow professionally (Krish et al., 2012).

Online communities can provide a space for dialogue around topics such as evaluation, but must also nurture social connections that motivate individuals to come together online. The moderator or leader must also play a role in fostering trusting relationships among members of the learning community (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Recurring themes occur in the literature on PD, regardless of whether it is face-to-face or online: trust is important, leadership/facilitation (even shared) is necessary, and organization of the community is essential (Broadley, 2012; Chen, 2011). Networking sites work well if structured, "... small groups with a clear focus around a narrow set of clear shared objectives were proving to be the most effective and productive...." (Gray & Smith, 2012, p. 74).

Surette and Johnson (2015) found many studies indicated that online PD enabled teachers to learn actively through, "(a) reflecting on their student's work, (b) reflecting on their own classroom practices, (c) receiving feedback on their work from their peers, and (d) engaging with their peers in online discussion forums" (p.264). These findings can be generalized to ECD professionals and similar fields of work.

Killion and Treacy (2014) make a number of recommendations about technology support, including promoting collaboration, advancing learning as social, and building technology that enhances knowledge and skills. Individual and collaborative online models are necessary for a balanced approach. The need for connectedness, sharing, and a sense of community is essential in PD, which is consistent with recommended criteria for creating online communities (Feltnerberger, Johnson, & Sinkinson, 2014).

Chapter 3: Development of a Communication Plan

Determining the methods or modes of creating a central point for dialogue among stakeholders in the Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN), the focused case of this project, was a critical next step. A number of strategies were identified, with the overarching goal of this project being to determine how an online community could best be utilized to build capacity by creating an environment of sharing and learning around evaluation in ECD. In order to capture these strategies the ECN project management team engaged two master students, of which I was one, to develop a communication plan that would include the creation of an online community of practice (CoP). To accomplish this goal, three distinct phases of the project were required. First, a communication plan was developed in collaboration with the project management team of the ECN. Next, one aspect of the communication plan, the creation of a blog, was developed to facilitate the online CoP. Finally, the ECN stakeholders were surveyed to determine online communication experiences, needs, and preferences for future engagement.

Method of Developing the Communication Plan

As a critical step for building evaluation capacity, the ECN determined the need for a communication plan that could provide focus and guidance in order to increase conversations, information sharing, and knowledge of evaluation among ECD stakeholders. A number of steps were involved in creating the communication plan, and these will be outlined below.

To determine the communication needs of the organization a team of individuals who were vested in the ECN (i.e., ECN Project Management Team), communication specialists (Maria deBruijn and Dr. Jessica Laccetti), and two graduate students from the

Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology (MACT) program (Tanya Ray and Lucas Warren) were brought together. The primary mission of the ECN was reviewed to ensure that it remained at the forefront of any communication goals, objectives and actions that the group decided to take. A review of accomplishments so far included the creation of the ECN logo, a recent email campaign, production of a newsletter, creation of a small presence on Twitter, and past presentations at conferences.

The group stressed the need for a community of practice with shared understanding of evaluation where people work together and share resources. Many tactics were identified to help achieve the vision, with discussion around ensuring a balance between tactics that facilitated both two-way and one-way communication. Discussion forums, presentations, conferences, and community engagement forums were essential, as were newsletters, email campaigns, and Twitter.

Following the meeting, the two graduate students worked together with the support of the ECN project management team and the communication specialists to develop a communication plan for the ECN. Drawing on the notes from the planning meeting, a communication template and existing ECN documents, the communication plan was developed. Elements of the communication plan included background information such as the vision, mission, and description of the ECN and the communication goals of the ECN. This was followed by a situational analysis, strategies, and tactics used to meet the communication goals.

Communication Goals. Ultimately the ECNs communication goals were to facilitate discussion around evaluation, broaden understanding of evaluation methods and practices, provide safe and accessible communication and learning spaces, broker

existing resources, and create or support others to create capacity building opportunities for evaluation in ECD.

Situational Analysis. Conducting a situational analysis of both the ECN's external and internal environment helps in understanding the identity of the ECN, who we tell the ECN story to, and why we tell the ECN story. In a situational analysis it is important to identify the things that will help achieve the communication goals and those that may interfere. This analysis tells the ECN story, providing some history as to why they exist and provides information on what already exists for building capacity for evaluation and what is still needed.

Analyzing the internal environment provides history of the ECN. To conduct this internal analysis exploration of historical documents that outlined the evolution of the ECN were used including previous reports, proposals, newsletters, and a stimulus paper that was developed by the ECN. Prior to the initiation of the ECN, Bisanz, Shaw, and Edwards (2012) conducted focus groups with community and university partners which resulted in findings that stressed the importance of further dialogue among ECD stakeholders, including government, community agencies, funders, and academics. Participants emphasized the importance of creating a central point where stakeholders could access coordinated evaluation capacity building resources, and ensure high quality training, practice, and research in evaluation.

In order to extract important information within the situational analysis it was important to conduct a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of the ECN (Gomer & Hill, 2016). The ECN had strong expertise across faculties and departments at the University of Alberta, had competent staff and organizational abilities,

and strong community partnerships. Interest in the ECN was high and there were many new partnerships to be fostered. Cautions to consider included the fact that the ECN was currently funded by government grants, which made them reliant on approval of proposals to continue their work. Their social media presence needed to be strengthened, the potential partnerships enhanced, recognizing limited human resources to accomplish this work. Being aware of these weaknesses and threats assists in decisions about what strategies and tactics are most appropriate for the ECN.

Communication Strategies. At this point we had significant information to move forward in developing communication strategies. The two students divided up sections of the communication plan for initial work and followed up by adding to the other's sections. This was completed within a Google document to ensure consistency of writing style. The students met via Face Time video once per week for six weeks reviewing progress within the document. The first draft of the plan went back to the ECN project management team for review; editing and content suggestions came back and were incorporated. This feedback loop occurred three times while building the plan. Once content was complete one student formatted the document in a word document while the other did final edits.

Strategies suggested for use in meeting the ECN communication goals, included listening to stakeholders and potential members, growing the community to ensure its accessibility and usefulness, connecting with the appropriate audience, and broadcasting (marketing and advertising). For more detailed information please see Appendix A Communication Plan.

Tactics/Tools. The last important piece of the plan was to determine what tactics/tools would be utilized to accomplish the communication goals of the ECN. These included developing a community by using an online platform such as a website/blog, boosting Twitter use for increased visibility, attending conferences for visibility, and creating an editorial calendar to ensure all media is used consistently. For a full list of tactics please refer to Appendix: Communication Plan. The tactic we focused on from the communication plan was the creation of an online community, as it had the most potential for attempting to meet all of the communication goals of the ECN

Creating the ECN blog as an Online Community

As the communication plan is quite extensive, we focused on one aspect of it, creating an online community. As noted earlier, an online community is a group of people who come together virtually through “various forms of computer-mediated communications” (Han et al., 2014, p. 911) to interact, cooperate, collaborate, learn and grow based on a shared purpose, obtaining support, advice or exchanging information. The users share a core set of values, interests and a strong set of secondary connections. Based on this definition, online communities can come in various platforms and are utilized for different purposes. They range from retail communities to book clubs and may exist within a website or a private group on Facebook.

The ECN communicates their message through a variety of venues/platforms. The use of technology is imperative in organizational communication, as it reaches interested parties quickly and easily (Mumby, 2013). To create the online community we engaged the project management team again to explore platform options. Discussion occurred around the use of a full website or a blog. In deciding on a platform for the group it was

necessary to explore different aspects such as audience, the subject matter, expertise of the group in terms of technology, purpose of the site, and the ease of use. The technical expertise, along with time, money and ease of use, resulted in the group preferring a Blog to a full website. Blog host choices were narrowed down, and two blog platforms were presented to the ECN project management team with benefits and limitations of each platform. The group chose Word Press over Blogger as a result of Word Press's increased functionality and variety of uses, ultimately serving as a website.

The next step was starting a Word Press account and beginning the process of creating and adding content. This occurred for two weeks by pulling content from existing ECN resources and documents. The skeleton blog was presented to the team for comments and feedback, as well as giving them the opportunity to ask questions and gain knowledge on the workings of Word Press.

Building the Blog

The purpose of the Blog for the ECN was not only to provide and share information on evaluation but for others to share and engage in dialogue. The intent was to make the site interactive; a mutual place to post information, ask questions, provide guidance, and dialogue with others around evaluation capacity building in ECD. Because the ECN existed as part of the Community-University Partnership (CUP) for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (www.cup.ualberta.ca) website they already had a great deal accomplished. The initial draft of the blog required importing current information from the CUP site, which contained a section on the ECN. The mission, vision, stories, articles, and pictures were imported into the site, and then access was given to the team. As we played with the look, content, and organization of the site, the team gave feedback

and adjustments were made. Once the skeleton was in place the ECN project manager was given access to the Blog and provided with information on how to add and manipulate content.

The development of the Blog was also guided by many of the principles outlined in Kraut and Resnick's book, *Building Successful Online Communities*. Attention was given to many of the factors outlined above in the literature review. The Blog needed a clean look that had key areas to access information. The tabs within the Blog included: About, Partners, Resources, Blog and Sign Up. The *About* section gave information on the ECN including the vision and mission and some history. *Partners* included names and information about stakeholders that are already part of the ECN and links to their sites. The *Resources* section included reports, articles and interesting information on evaluation. The site was filled with rich information, including recent research, events occurring around evaluation, and lists of links and partners. Users of the site could also sign up for free as members, receiving regular emails that reminded them to check the blog for updates.

The next aspect of the Blog that required attention was the ability to create a space for dialogue and discussion (i.e., a discussion forum). Kraut and Resnick (2011) provide many suggestions on how to do this, however prior to attempting to build an interactive space/discussion forum it is important to find out how the current stakeholders/members communicate through technology and to research how they learn and interact online. This knowledge will not only guide what kind of interactivity is put in place, but also how individuals will be encouraged to participate and contribute.

Chapter 4: Methods

The overarching purpose of this project was to understand the communication needs of early childhood development (ECD) stakeholders involved in evaluation. More specifically, the various online methods ECD stakeholders currently use and would consider using in the future for professional development, education, communication and collaboration around evaluation were explored. This information would serve to help determine how the development of an online community could be constructed to build capacity for evaluation. Data was collected using an online survey, which is a simple low-cost method for gathering information from a large group of people.

Survey

The Evaluation Capacity Network (ECN) created a survey to understand the individual and organizational needs and capacity for evaluation in the ECD sector. The survey was comprised of over 100 questions in the form of likert scale, closed and open formed questions, and areas for explanation and comments. The survey was divided into four main sections, including questions about individual capacity, organizational capacity, demographic questions, and professional development (PD) and education around evaluation. Prior to starting the main portion of the survey, participants were asked if their current roles and responsibilities included activities that support evaluation. For those that responded yes, they were administered the entire survey. For those that responded no, they only responded to certain portions of the survey.

The first of the four sections had 58 likert scale questions that focused on individual capacity; participants were asked to respond to questions about their evaluation knowledge, attitudes, motivation, and skills. The organizational section

included 33 questions about leadership, staff involvement, professional development opportunities, and funding for learning and evaluation. The demographics section had seven main questions that asked about age, gender, and level of education, position and service years within their organization, organization location and experience with evaluation.

The fourth section, which is the focus of this project, had eight questions about PD and communication, and asked about individual learning styles, and how participants have accessed online resources. Specific questions included determining what kind of PD/training around evaluation individuals had, who funded the training, preferred methods for PD, and where individuals go to access information or resources related to evaluation. Further questions included the ways in which individuals participate and contribute in online platforms and what aspects of online spaces are most important to them. An example of this included rating the important aspects of an online platform - easy to use, immediate response to questions, or presence of a discussion forum.

Recruitment

The ECN held four community discussion forums across the province in Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge and Grande Prairie with a total of over 120 participants attending. The stakeholders that were invited to the forums were considered innovators or leaders in the field of ECD and evaluation. Prior to attending the forum, each participant was sent an electronic version of the survey to complete. The data was used to inform the discussions during the forums. During the forums, stakeholders in attendance commented that they would like a broader reflection of the evaluation capacity needs of the ECD field and recommended that the survey be sent to a broader audience. Following this

recommendation, the ECN project management team made some modifications to the survey and sent it out to each participant that was invited to and/or attended the forums (over 120) and requested that they send the link to other ECD stakeholders in their organization; from front line staff that serve young children, management and supervisors, and decision makers and funders. The University of Alberta research ethics board approved the project.

Participants

The participants for this project were all staff who received the link to the survey through ECN stakeholders (their supervisor/director). To complete the survey respondents clicked on a hyperlink within the email that was sent to them by their supervisor/director. The survey was sent out on May 30th, 2016 and respondents were given until June 3rd (three weeks) to complete the online survey, with two reminders during this time frame. When participants opened the link to the survey they were greeted with an information page that explained the survey, including that it was confidential, voluntary and they were free to leave the survey at any time. By beginning the survey the participant agreed to the conditions and gave consent. The demographic questions were designed so that the anonymity of the participants would not be compromised.

Data collection

The data collection used purposeful sampling (ECD stakeholders) with a convenience sample (individuals in stakeholder organizations), as the initial stakeholders were used as intermediaries to reach a more diverse ECD population. Most of the initial stakeholders were directors and managers and it was important to ensure data from

frontline staff was also collected. This method was a simple way to reach beyond the 120 stakeholders from the discussion forums.

One hundred and sixty three stakeholders received the survey to send out, with 225 completed surveys returned. There is no way to know the number of individuals who were asked to complete the survey because of the sampling method. The focus of the data analysis is on the 225 participants that completed the secondary survey. For information on the entire sample and survey questions please visit www.evaluationcapacitynetwork.com.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by reviewing the frequency of responses to select questions, and frequencies of responses to questions based on certain groups/demographics. The specific demographics that were examined included the age and education level of respondents. Open-ended responses were used to support or explain the frequency data.

The age groups that were created to explore frequency of PD preferences by age were as follows: under 29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60 and above. PD preferences were also explored by respondent's education level (high school diploma or less, post-secondary certificate/diploma, undergraduate degree, graduate degree).

Chapter 5: Results

The results section is presented according to the two sections of the survey that are the focus of this project: Demographics and Professional Development. In response to the initial question, related to experience in evaluation activities, 174 (76.7%) of the 227 initial respondents worked in roles where activities that support evaluation were part of their responsibility. Within the demographics and PD sections 225 of the 227 responded.

Demographics

Of the 225 responses, 93.8 % were female. The participants were a highly educated group with 46.2% possessing a post-secondary certificate or diploma, 25.3% with an undergraduate degree, and 23.6% with a graduate degree. The majority of respondents worked in management (program director or supervisor) or frontline (work directly with clients), with only 3.5% identifying as evaluators or evaluation consultants. See Table 1 below for demographics.

The length of an individual's employment within their organization was a fairly even distribution with fewer participants employed less than a year (13.7%) and a few more employed over ten years (23.9%). All participants lived in Alberta, with the largest percentage (40.6%) of participants from Edmonton.

Table 1

Demographics of Respondents

Variable	Descriptive	
<i>Age (years) (215 reported on age)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
29 or younger	25	11.7
30-39	59	27.4
40-49	60	27.9
50-59	54	25.1
60 or older	17	7.9
<i>Education</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
High school or equivalent	11	4.9
Post-secondary certificate or diploma	104	46.2
Undergraduate degree	57	25.3
Master's degree	53	23.6
<i>Current Position</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Leadership (e.g., CEO, Executive Director)	21	9.3
Management (e.g., Program Director, Supervisor)	84	37.2
Frontline (e.g., Work with clients directly)	69	30.5
Support staff	7	3.1
Researcher/Academic	1	.4
Educator	20	8.8
Evaluator (e.g., Evaluation Consultant, Internal Evaluator)	8	3.5
Other (please specify)	16	7.1
<i>Years worked in present organization</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Less than 1	31	13.7
1-4	80	35.4
5-9	61	27
10 years or more	54	23.9
<i>Geographical Location</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Calgary	38	17
Edmonton	91	40.6
Grande Prairie	17	7.6
Lethbridge	8	3.6
Medicine Hat	9	4
Other (surrounding areas to centers)	61	27.2

Professional Development

In the section on PD/education around evaluation, the first question asks if respondents have ever taken PD/training related to evaluation. Of the 225 who responded to this question, 47% of participants have taken PD around evaluation. The individuals reported on the types of training they have been involved in with the majority being workshops (76.4%), on-site training (48.2%), and coaching or mentoring at work (47.3%). The PD was reportedly funded by 47.6% of the respondents current or past employer, with 22.9% funded by the individual's themselves. An additional 19.0% of PD was free of charge. A reoccurring comment in the explanatory section was that PD was dependent on time and money available.

Table 2

Professional Development Received

Type	Number of responses	Percentage
Workshops	83	36.4%
On-site training	53	23.2%
Coaching/mentoring at work	50	21.9%
Webinar	34	14.9%
University/College degree/certificate	28	12.3%
University/College level evaluation course	27	11.8%
Community of Practice (in person)	26	11.4%
Community of Practice (online)	8	3.5%
Essential skills series course by Canadian Evaluation Society (CES)	7	3.1%
Other	2	.9%
TOTAL	318	100%

Note. Participants could choose as many as applied to them.

Participants were asked about their top three preferred methods for PD and training with options including formal and informal methods such as workshops and college certificates or diplomas (see Table 3). The top choices for PD/training learning method were workshops, on-site training, and coaching or mentoring at work. In comparing communities of practice online and in person, not one individual chose online as their number one choice while nine chose in person as their number one choice.

Table 3

Top Three Preferred Methods of PD/Training

Variable	1 st choice freq (valid %)	2 nd choice freq (valid %)	3 rd choice freq (valid %)	Total frequency
Workshops	76 (44.2%)	55 (32.0%)	41 (23.8%)	172
On-site training	54 (37.8%)	57 (39.9%)	32 (22.4%)	143
Coaching or mentoring at work	26 (25.2%)	42 (40.8%)	35 (34.0%)	103
Community of practice (in person)	9 (14.1%)	15 (23.4%)	40 (62.5%)	64
Webinar training	8 (15.1%)	21 (39.6%)	24 (45.3%)	53
University/ College level evaluation course	20 (41.7%)	18 (37.5%)	10 (20.8%)	48
University/College degree or certificate	31 (67.4%)	6 (13.0%)	9 (19.6%)	46
Online resources	1 (3.4%)	7 (24.1%)	21 (72.4%)	29
Community of practice (online)	0 0.0%	5 29.4%	12 70.6%	17

Given that the focus of this research is aimed at exploring the various online methods ECD stakeholders currently use and would consider using in the future for professional development, education, communication and collaboration around evaluation, it was important to explore whether their age or education level had an impact on their experience and preference. To begin, the first choice results of Table 3 were divided according to age category (under 29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60 and above), as shown in table 4. The age group that chose workshops as their first choice overall was the 60-69 year olds. The 29 or younger and 40-49 age categories were also high in this area, although the remaining age groups were only slightly lower. Onsite training was also preferred with the highest among the 40-49 year olds.

In exploring the online choices: webinar, online CoP and online resources it is noted that all age categories had very few responses (see Table 4).

Table 4

Preferred PD Method by Age Category

PD Method (1 st choice)	Age Range				
	29 or younger n = 25	30-39 n = 59	40-49 n = 60	50-59 n = 54	60 or older n = 17
Workshop	9 (36%)	20 (33.9%)	24 (40%)	13 (24%)	8 (47%)
On-site Training	1 (4%)	11 (18.6%)	13 (21.7%)	22 (41%)	3 (17.6%)
University/college degree/certificate	7 (28%)	10 (16.9%)	9 (15%)	3 (5.6%)	2 (11.8%)
Coaching/mentoring at work	6 (24%)	9 (15.3%)	4 (6.7%)	4 (7.4%)	1 (5.9%)
University/College level evaluation course	0 (0%)	5 (8.5%)	5 (8.3%)	7 (13%)	2 (11.8%)
Online Resources	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)	0 (0%)
Community of Practice (In-person)	2 (8%)	2 (3.4%)	2 (3.3%)	2 (3.7%)	0 (0%)
Webinar	0 (0%)	2 (3.4%)	3 (5%)	1 (1.9%)	1 (5.9%)
Community of Practice (online)	0 (0%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (1.7%)	2 (3.7%)	0 (0%)

The first choice results of Table 3 were also divided by education level (High school, certificate/diploma, undergraduate degree, & graduate degree). Workshops once again were the most popular, particularly with the high school diploma group. The high school diploma group also selected coaching/mentoring at work as their number one choice, but all other choices scored very low (below 10%). The other three categories scored on-site training as their second most chosen preference. All groups scored both types of communities of practice, webinars and online resources very low (see Table 5).

Table 5

Preferred PD Method by Education Level

PD Method (1 st choice)	Education Level			
	High School diploma/ equivalent	Post- secondary certificate/ diploma	Undergrad degree	Graduate degree
	n = 11	n = 104	n = 57	n = 53
Workshop	5 (45.5%)	38 (36.5%)	19 (33.3%)	13 (24.5%)
On-site Training	1 (9%)	28 (26.9%)	15 (26.3%)	10 (18.9%)
University/college degree/certificate	1 (9%)	18 (23%)	3 (5.2%)	9 (17%)
Coaching/mentoring at work	3 (27.3%)	9 (8.7%)	9 (15.8%)	5 (9.4%)
University/College level evaluation course	0 (0%)	5 (4.8%)	6 (10.5%)	9 (17%)
Community of Practice (In-person)	0 (0%)	2 (1.9%)	2 (3.5%)	5 (9.4%)
Webinar	1 (9%)	2 (1.9%)	3 (5.3%)	2 (3.8%)
Community of Practice (online)	0 (0%)	2 (1.9%)	1 (1.8%)	2 (3.8%)
Online Resources	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Individuals were then asked a more general question about preferences when selecting learning opportunities. They rated the choices of methods of learning (online, short-term, individual, credentialed, onsite) on a 5-point likert scale from most preferred to least preferred. The least preferred was online learning at only 6.8%. Short-term credentialed learning was rated as a preferred method as was onsite training. Across the other options of types of learning, for most preferred to least preferred it was equally distributed (see Table 6).

Table 6

Preference for Learning Opportunities

Variable	N	Most preferred			Least preferred		Variable
		2	1	0	1	2	
Online learning	221	15 6.8%	23 10.4%	12 5.4%	55 24.9%	116 52.5%	In-person learning
Short term learning (i.e., 1-2 day training)	224	72 32.1%	66 29.5%	18 8.0%	32 14.3%	36 16.1%	Long term learning (i.e., 1-13 week course)
Individual learning	218	26 11.9%	35 16.1%	35 16.1%	65 29.8%	57 26.1%	Group learning
Credentialed learning (i.e., degree, certificate)	208	51 24.5%	73 35.1%	24 11.5%	40 19.2%	20 9.6%	Non-credentialed learning
Onsite training (i.e., training at workplace)	210	50 23.8%	48 22.9%	35 16.7%	41 19.5%	36 17.1%	Offsite training (i.e., training outside of workplace)

Note. N = Number; the total number in each row varies, as not all participants answered every question.

When accessing or contributing to information online (e.g., online forum) the survey asked to what extent (3 point likert) certain characteristics (e.g., ease of use, professional platform) were important to the individual – ranging from not at all to very important. Participants rated ease of navigating the online platform, secure personal information, participation by experts/professionals, a site free of advertising, and opportunity for dialogue among members as some of the most important characteristics in their use of online platforms (See Table 7).

Table 7

Important Characteristics of Online Communities

Feature	N	Not at all important Freq (Valid %)	Somewhat important Freq (Valid %)	Very important Freq (Valid %)
A platform (e.g., website, blog) that is professionally designed	218	21 (9.6%)	106 (48.6%)	91 (41.7%)
Ease of navigating the online platform	218	3 (1.4%)	39 (17.9%)	176 (80.7%)
Secure personal information	217	5 (2.3%)	25 (11.5%)	187 (86.2%)
Push notifications (i.e. email when new items are posted)	215	63 (29.3%)	108 (50.2%)	44 (20.5%)
Fast response on posted comments and questions	214	15 (7.0%)	110 (51.4%)	89 (41.6%)
Ability to use ID's or profiles from other sites (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook)	215	118 (54.9%)	73 (34.0%)	24 (11.2%)
Content sharing between other online communities or websites	215	43 (20.0%)	130 (60.5%)	42 (19.5%)
Incentives given for participating/generating content	214	95 (44.4%)	90 (42.1%)	29 (13.6%)
Participation by known experts/professionals	218	6 (2.8%)	73 (33.5%)	139 (63.8%)
An opportunity for dialogue among members	218	19 (8.7%)	104 (47.7%)	95 (43.6%)
A site free of advertising	215	35 (16.3%)	74 (34.4%)	106 (49.3%)

Note. N = Number; Number varies, as not all participants responded

The survey asked another question that required participants to check off the ways they access information on the topic of evaluation. Choices given included both traditional methods (text books, discussion papers, how-to manuals/tools) and technology based (webinars, websites, blogs, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitter). Websites (42.1%) and webinars (31.6%) were the most frequently chosen, followed by textbooks, discussion papers, and how-to manuals. Social media sites were not as popular and Blogs (4.4%) and Twitter (1.8%) were chosen least often.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusions

The focus of this project is to understand the communication needs of ECD stakeholders involved in evaluation by exploring the various online methods they prefer and use to educate, communicate, and collaborate about evaluation. An online community is one way of expanding this education and collaboration. When considering using an online community, determining the target audience's method of learning and current use of online methods of learning is useful. To explore this, a survey was sent out to stakeholders asking key questions around experience and preferred methods of PD and learning. These stakeholders were to fan out the survey to the staff within their agencies. This convenience sample was a quick and convenient way to reach considerably more people. In this section, the project findings will be used to discuss professional development around evaluation in relationship to developing and maintaining an online community. Individual's experiences and preferences around learning and professional development in terms of their age and education will also be discussed, followed by recommendations for developing an online community, limitations of the project and future directions for research.

The demographic section of the survey showed that of the 225 respondents 93.8% were female, which is typical of the field of ECD (Government of Canada, 2015). The participants were a highly educated group with 95% having a post-secondary certificate or higher and 24% having graduate degrees (see Table 1). Post-secondary certificates/diplomas are not uncommon as people working in ECD are required to have this credentialing, however this level may differ in rural areas due to lack of work force

(McCain, et al., 2007). The vast majority of participants worked in manager or frontline positions, which was the population this survey was attempting to reach.

Of the participants, 76.7% had roles where they were involved in activities that support evaluation. This number verifies the importance that knowledge, understanding and sharing around evaluation is necessary to not only do evaluation but to use the results in meaningful ways (Cousins, et al., 2014). Of the individuals who have taken part in evaluation in their current roles, only 47% have taken PD related to evaluation. Given that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the participants are currently in roles that require evaluation it is surprising that only half of them have taken some kind of PD on the subject. This suggests a need for increased education and dialogue around evaluation in ECD, especially given the large percentage of individuals in this project that reported their roles involve evaluation activities. We know that capacity building is about individual skill building and organizational support that builds and strengthens skills in a particular area (Labin, 2014). Building capacity for evaluation will increase knowledge and appropriate use of evaluation leading to not only continued funding, but also increased skills on how to do and use evaluation, leading to improved programming and education in ECD (Cousins et al., 2014).

In exploring the results of preferred PD it is clear that face-to-face methods such as workshops and online training are preferred. With the increase in ease and use of technology these results were surprising. To determine if there were any differences in preference as a result of participant characteristics, the data was divided by age and level of education. This revealed that members of the youngest age group (29 and younger) are very interested in credentials through certificates/diplomas. The rate at which young

people in Alberta attend post-secondary fluctuates with post-secondary program spaces, financial preparedness, and economic conditions. When unemployment is high, enrolment in post-secondary increases (Berger, 2009). In Alberta, ECD settings require a minimum of one course in ECD to become a child development assistant, a one-year certificate in Early Learning and Childcare earns the status of child development worker, and a two-year diploma can result in supervisory status. With each level of education, individuals gain additional skills and responsibilities as well as an hourly pay incentive provided by the government (Alberta Human Services, 2015).

The older two age categories (50-59 and 60 and up) did not rate university or college certification as their preferred choices. This may be because they do not see the value in credentials at this point in their career or because they have already received the top credentials for their position within their organization. Older adults may be interested in increasing knowledge and skills through workshops or training, but not necessarily credentials. Older adults who gain credentials tend to benefit by receiving a promotion or increase in pay, but only if they stay in their current organization (Palameta & Zhang, 2006).

When responses to PD preferences were divided by education level the high school diploma/equivalent group did not rate college certificate/diploma as their top choice. It is surprising that this group did not rate a higher education as one of their preferred methods, however, it could be that it is not required for their current job or it is not something they had ever considered. It should be noted that this group was small when compared with the groups with certificate/diploma or undergraduate degrees.

When respondents answered questions about the PD they have participated in and the methods they preferred, workshops and on-site training were ranked the highest. However, when asked how they access general information on evaluation they preferred websites and webinars, both of which are online methods. Blogs and other social media were much less popular. This indicates a discrepancy between PD methods preferences and location for finding information on the subject of evaluation. One might conclude that the use of technology is not the issue, but perhaps people's experiences with more formal education through technology, such as online communities or online courses, have not been positive. The use of social media was ranked low, and could indicate a need for training on how social media can benefit their communication in the workplace. For example, Feeney and Freeman (2015) discuss smartphones and social media use in the ECD environment, outlining guidelines and appropriate use such as a classroom Facebook page (but with written consent for members to join).

Workshops and face-to-face methods of PD are often chosen because of their interactive nature and familiarity (Dron & Anderson, 2014). In reviewing the open-ended responses to a PD question about selecting preferences for learning opportunities, participants indicated that cost of travel and time interferes with the ability to obtain frequent PD. This aligns with the literature that outlines barriers to PD access include increasing cost, a decrease in professional development funds, isolation of some professionals, and the cost of time needed to attend (Blitz, 2013; Broadley, 2012; Hur & Brush, 2009). Almost 50% of respondents had employers pay for their PD, however they did not indicate if they were satisfied with the amount of PD they receive each year. Although 19% received PD free of charge, it is worth noting that free PD is often funded

by government agencies such as the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE), companies (private industry), or foundations (Muttart Foundation) that sponsor workshops or conferences. Given the current economic situation within Alberta, relying on free or funded PD may not be the most proactive measure for ensuring accessible PD. Although the preference tends to be for face-to-face (i.e., workshops), the cost of these methods does not always make it feasible to attend, particularly for those in remote areas. The apprehension towards online methods of PD may indicate participant's lack of experience with online PD such as participating in an online community. Or perhaps they have only experienced online PD that lacks in interactivity and collaborative learning. Another contributing factor to the limited use of certain online tools may be a lack of understanding of the various online platforms. For example, a blog today can function as a website. Perhaps people use them as well as other online community platforms without awareness, lumping them all under the label of websites. This information along with the findings indicating what is important to people when contributing online (Table 6) provides valuable information when creating an online space for this population. Respondents want a platform that looks professional, is easy to navigate, keeps personal information secure, is free of advertising, has expert participants, and personnel that responds to questions and comments. This is consistent with Kraut and Resnick's (2011) recommendations when building an online community; a clean look that is easy to navigate, provides opportunities to share information but the choice to remain anonymous, has little advertising or at least relative advertising to the subject, engages professionals to participate, and has a moderator who responds to comments and encourages people to contribute to the community. These

recommendations are not consistent across all online communities but are tailored to meet the needs of each unique community, depending on the purpose, size and function of the community. The noted features from this project should guide the creation and maintenance of the ECN's online community (Howard, 2010; Kraut & Resnick, 2011).

The importance of creating an online community is a clear goal for the ECN. The fact that very few people selected an online community of practice as their top choice for PD and education may at first be concerning to the ECN. However, defining what an online community is, how it functions and what can be done to encourage membership and contribution should be the larger focus. Individuals likely gravitate towards PD and education that they have experience with, and a lack of understanding, limited experience, and fear of new technology is more likely the reason for not selecting online communities or Blogs, than it is about their dislike of the method. When the frequency of type of PD by age was examined, it was interesting to note that the highest number who were willing to use online methods were the 40-49 and 50-59 year olds (although the numbers were very low across all ages). Perhaps this age category has observed the growth of online methods and resources and has experienced a constant improvement on the ease of use of online platforms.

The participants of this project indicated that they prefer to learn in person, short-term, and in a group setting. This aligns with Wenger's (2010) connectivism theory that suggests that learning is a social process in which people construct an identity through interaction within the community. Connectivism creates a social network of learning, sharing and self-sufficiency and can be accomplished within an online community (Dron & Anderson, 2014). The discrepancy within this project between what people say they

want and what is possible within online communities could be related to their lack of experiences, or negative past experiences. Determining how to create a positive online experience that offers participants a group setting that provides interaction, participation, and feelings of connectedness they would likely receive in a face-to-face workshop will be an important design challenge for the moderator(s) of the ECN's online platform to consider. The preferences stated in Table 6 will be a good place to start. As the community starts to function it will evolve and require changes to its set up, organization, and functioning. It takes time, careful thought, adaptability, and a knowledgeable moderator to create and maintain an effective online community (Kraut and Resnick, 2011).

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

While there is much strength to this research such as the strong evaluation PD preferences of a large sample of ECD stakeholders, there are limitations. This project used a convenience sample, which is not necessarily a representative sample of the ECD sector within the province and may be missing information from individuals in more remote settings. Although the convenience sample was a quick and convenient way to reach considerably more people, sending the survey to the ECD sector by partnering with government or funders of ECD programs could result in a broader cross-section of participants.

The use of a survey provided a convenient way to reach a large number of participants from major centers throughout the province. The survey structure allowed for a large number of questions to be answered in relatively little time. Because most of the questions were closed ended this limited the ability to uncover the reasons why

people chose the answers they did. For example, why did so few individuals pick online communities as a method for PD in evaluation? Focus groups or interviews with a small group of participants could shed light on some of the conclusions that were drawn from the results (e.g., participants may be uncomfortable with technology) or perhaps it might reveal that there is limited technology support within their agencies. Deepening our understanding about attitudes toward, and specific experiences of, online methods would be informative and valuable. This would reveal why online methods were not rated as positively and perhaps provide guidance on methods for engaging the ECD sector online through a community of practice.

The survey questions were detailed and thorough covering many aspects including demographics and PD method preferences, which were the focus of this project. Some of the questions contained various forms of face-to-face and online PD. It would be beneficial to define the choices within the questions, to ensure participants understood what they were or were not choosing (i.e., defining what a blog is and how it functions). This education piece would ensure participants were making informed choices.

The survey questions for this project were added to another more expansive survey for the ECN. Although not the focus of this project, it would be interesting to explore the PD preferences in relation to the individual and organizational capacity of agencies through the other sections of the survey. This information could potentially provide explanations as to the choices participants made. For example, an individual may work for an organization that does not promote PD or perhaps contributes little or no funding for PD.

The ECNs goal of increasing capacity for evaluation in ECD is necessary for the continued growth and understanding of evaluation in this sector. Creating an online community can serve as a useful and cost-effective medium to promote education, dialogue and effective use of evaluation within the field. The results of this project serve to guide the ECNs efforts in constructing a vibrant and active online community of practice that serves to meet the needs for all stakeholders within the province and beyond.

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