

Meta-evaluation: Executive Summary

Stephen Kemmis¹ was commissioned to conduct a meta-evaluation of the CIRCE evaluation study. The meta-evaluation was conducted in October, 1997, principally by review of all of the archives of the CIRCE study, interviews with evaluation team members, and attendance at an Evaluation Advisory Committee meeting. On October 29, a “meta-evaluation court” was held, to raise questions about matters which might throw doubt on the dependability of the findings of the CIRCE study.² The meta-evaluation concluded as the CIRCE Final Report was being prepared.

In addition to this report, a 25-page working paper was compiled during the course of the meta-evaluation, outlining its conceptual framework, exploring the grasp of the CIRCE study on the RFW program, and raising issues to be considered by the CIRCE team.

The CIRCE evaluation was designed to be conducted within a 90-day time-frame. The schedule was demanding, and there was a little slippage in meeting the final deadline, largely because the team encountered unexpected delays in gaining research clearances within the VBA.

The study adopted a “responsive” approach, emphasizing fieldwork, close study of sites, and attentiveness to issues arising in participants’ experience of the program. The CIRCE evaluation team as a whole has strong experience in conducting evaluation work of this kind.

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² Attendees included: the CIRCE evaluation team, Wilson Sapp (Evaluation Advisory Committee), and Rosemary Tunnell (a VBA Central Office staff member based in St. Louis). We are grateful to observer Edith Cisneros for her assistance in making notes of the meeting.

Goal: from Evaluation Brief	Addressed by the CIRCE evaluation study in...
To review the original need, the program plan, and the goals and intended outcomes of the program	These topics are generally addressed in CIRCE's review of RFW program history, but little specific attention to the RFW program plan was evident in evaluation documentation at the time of the meta-evaluation court.
To assess the impact of training that has been conducted to date on field units and their clients the veterans who are being served	The impact of training on field units was addressed via several principal components of the CIRCE study (including field studies of sites, analysis of letters, and questionnaire surveys of trainees and administrators). The impact of RFW on veterans was explored through telephone interviews, but there were some design difficulties in assessing impact through these interviews.
To determine the effectiveness of the training method	Trainee satisfaction was addressed through several principal components of the CIRCE study, but because of the timing of the evaluation study, little observational data was available on training in progress.
To assess the impact of the VBA infrastructure on the process of changing writing habits of its work force	Infrastructure effects were considered by the CIRCE study in field studies of sites, producing dependable findings about impediments and facilitating factors in the uptake of RFW in VBA letter-writing.
To provide information required to continue the program and adjust program management plans and program organization	The CIRCE study is generally non-recommendatory, but many of its findings permit inferences about possible changes to RFW training, management and organization (e.g., regarding duration and intensity of training, key groups to target for training, balance of central versus local site staff involvement in presenting training...).

In general, the CIRCE study attained the goals shown above and as outlined in the VBA Evaluation Brief.

General conclusions of this meta-evaluation study were that:

- (1) The design and conduct of the CIRCE study gave it a strong grasp on the RFB program, allowing the team to triangulate data, and to cross-reference and cross-check analyses and interpretations across the eight principal components of the CIRCE study,³ the six main data sources,⁴ and the six main data types.⁵ This cross-referencing and cross-checking permitted good verification of findings of the CIRCE study.
- (2) The explicit, systematic, responsive, cautious, (self-) critical and conscientious way in which planning, data-gathering, data-sharing, analysis, interpretation, composition and drafting were conducted by the CIRCE evaluation team encourages a high degree of confidence that the findings of the study are well-founded.
- (3) While the possibility of bias or distortion can never entirely be discounted when considering the evolution of issues which structure the conduct and findings of a responsive evaluation, there is no strong reason to believe that the progressive focusing on issues in the CIRCE study, and the representation of issues in its reports, involve any untoward distortion either (a) as a consequence of the evaluators having been “captured” by any particular group of informants, or (b) by their having been overly responsive to the particular information needs of the sponsors of the study, or (c) as a consequence of the internal dynamics and politics of the evaluation team.

³ The principal components of the CIRCE study were: (1) a review of RFB, (2) a portrayal of the VBA, (3) a survey of VBA administrators involved with RFB, (4) a survey of VBA Regional directors, (5) a sample survey of RFB trainees, (6) a follow-up writing task for RFB trainees, (7) analysis of letter files, and (8) telephone interviews with a sample of veterans receiving letters from VBA.

⁴ The six main data sources were: (1) VBA Central Office, (2) VBA Regional Offices, (3) RFB developers, (4) RFB instructors, (5) RFB trainees, and (6) veterans receiving letters from VBA.

⁵ The six main data types were: (1) document analysis, (2) field interviews, (3) telephone interviews, (4) briefings, correspondence and communication with various informants, (5) surveys, and (6) analysis of letter writing via performance tasks.

The working paper produced in the course of the meta-evaluation listed seven kinds of concerns about the CIRCE study, but only some of the most pressing (listed as bullet points below) were actually explored in the meta-evaluation court. Discussion focused on:

- (1) concerns about the overall quality of the study, including
 - the difficulty of conducting a complex study of a major initiative within a 90-day time-frame;
 - methods employed for participant confirmation of interpretations in site reports, through a national panel discussion of early issue reports, through the use of the Evaluation Advisory Committee, and through a debrief with VBA staff in Washington;
 - some difficulties in analyzing and interpreting the quality of RFW instruction, given that the timing of the study (nearly a year after the Tools Course was offered) meant that the CIRCE team had no direct observational access to training in progress--raising the issue of whether the team might seek additional expert opinion on the interactive-satellite approach to instruction and the content of RFW training in technical communication (in relation to the content of other technical writing training programs);
 - issues in the design of the telephone interview component of the CIRCE study, which had proposed a comparison of veterans' views of letters received from sites at which RFW training had and had not occurred (which turned out not to be a means of distinguishing whether veterans had received RFW-influenced letters)--raising the issue of how best to re-analyze the telephone interview data to ensure that the CIRCE study honored the voices and views of veterans about VBA letters; and
 - questions of balance in reporting the issues identified in the CIRCE study, and about how the relative importance of issues would be reflected through deployment and emphasis in the text of the Final Report;

- (2) concerns about the rationale of the CIRCE study and possible biases, including
 - the lack of attention to issues about VBA budgeting for RFW (as a possible indicator of the agency's likely commitment to continuing the initiative at a time when other customer-service-oriented initiatives may compete with RFW in agency reform);
- (3) concerns about the operation of the evaluation study;
- (4) concerns about issues in the evaluation study itself (as opposed to issues in RFW and RFW training), including
 - the extent to which the CIRCE report, as so far drafted, adequately represented the perspectives of the RFW developers on the initiative and on the conduct and impact of RFW training;
- (5) concerns about the context of the evaluation study;
- (6) concerns about the utility of the evaluation study, including
 - the extent to which the study could influence future RFW program plans (since the team had not made an analysis of the existing RFW program plan⁶); and
 - the extent to which the study might inadvertently assist or prejudice a decision to continue RFW (if the initiative is currently quiescent, and could be allowed to lapse unless champions in the agency make a strong commitment to re-starting it)--suggesting that the team might need to give close attention to the tone of the Final Report in addition to the usual attention close attention to matters of substance; and

⁶ This topic may be the subject of a separate VBA evaluation contract on the strategic planning of the RFW initiative.

- (7) concerns about the generalizability of the findings of the evaluation (as opposed to the generalizability of the RFW initiative itself).

