

Section 5.

The Evaluation Plan

The CIRCE evaluation of Reader Focused Writing was designed as an interpretive study, meaning that the team would acquaint itself with processes, contexts, and outcomes, then ponder and discuss the quality of the training, and prepare an issues-based report. The conceptual framework would be the issues (initial ones were outlined in the Section 4) found most relevant to the determination of quality. The goals, needs, perceptions and values of the sponsors of the training and evaluation would be heeded, but also those of the Regional Office staffs, the trainers, trainees, and ultimate clients, the veterans to whom letters are written. In this sense, the evaluation design is said to be a “responsive evaluation.”

Furthermore, the evaluation is a qualitative study, relying little on well-developed measures and statistical analysis, relying more on observational study and interpersonal discussion of events, relationships and quality. Quality, high or low, is seen as inherent in the actions of those responsible for the program and becomes increasingly apparent as aspirations, issues, and coping behavior are understood. The work of the evaluators is to come to understand program activity in its special contexts, all the while refining perceptions of value within the issues of program function and accomplishment.

In reporting the evaluation here, efforts have been made to enable the reader to make up their own minds as to quality, effectiveness, and future directions for Reader Focused Writing. Site visit descriptions at five sites have been made so that the reader has something of vicarious experience. The survey and letter rating data provide a public measure of how well this strategy worked in the conditions described. In as much as alternative strategies, delivery modes, and receptivities were not examined, the findings are not a strong research base for changing the training, but the issues examined should enable readers to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the 1996 plan for improving the letter-writing practices at the Regional Offices.

As the VBA materials clearly point out, Reader Focused Writing is much broader and deeper than a course in letter writing. Its principles were intended to be suitable for a wide range of communication responsibilities, and none of the findings of this study cast doubt upon that commitment. The Fall, 1996 training (Orientation and the Tools course) was highly concentrated on letter writing to veterans, and thus the evaluation was also, not extending much to the potential of RFW for other communication situations.

Outcome Variables. One of the key concerns was the effect that the training had on the 656 participants taking the seven day satellite training. We used the questionnaire and writing task included at the end of Sections 7 and 9. The ten minute questionnaire focused on their perceptions of the activity, quality, and use of the training. It was to be mailed to all participants for self administration and return. We prepared a 40 minute writing task, the task being to respond to a fictitious letter from a veteran, from which we might infer acceptance of the principles of Reader Focused Writing. We planned to give the task to 25 frequently letter-writing trainees at each of the five sites we visited, with self administration at their own desks.

To expand the detail and probe issues while at each of the five sites to be visited, we planned to interview half a dozen frequently writing trainees (not the ones doing the writing task) with questions such as:

- In your view, was the RFW instruction well organized?
- In your view, did you learn much about better letter-preparation?
- As a result of the training have you seen many examples of better letter writing?
- At this Regional Office, has infrastructure (examples given) been changed to support RFW?

And as a final measure of trainee effects, we planned to ask the same six trainees to draw from the files two letters they had sent veterans, one from before training and one from after training. We asked for letters of substance, ones in which the RFW principles could be observed.

The conduct of this study was hampered by our lack of familiarity with the ways the Regional Offices do business.

We presumed that the trainees would be composing letters from scratch, rather than amplifying computer generated letters. And we presumed from early descriptions of the training that most of the trainees would be heavily engaged in letter writing. And further that the writers could trace back in the files to letters they had written. We found that the file letters we wanted were very hard to locate and many of the veteran's letters were not in the files. We were unable to get enough pre-training and post-training letters from the same writer so we set up a comparison of letters from writers who had and who had not had RFB training. Criteria for rating the letters are described in Section 9.

Data from Veterans. We did not have the time or resources to develop a statistical survey of the veterans, yet wanted to get some indication of their concerns about VA letters. We modified a qualitative focus group procedure to get answers to seven questions. After getting human subjects clearance, we asked for names and addresses of recent-contact veterans from the Regional Offices, a dozen from sites we would visit, four from sites which did not participate in RFB training. The vets were to be notified in advance, to be assured of the voluntary nature of participation, and to be assured that the call would last no longer than ten minutes.

Data from Administrators. The site visit plan was based largely on the interviews that could be obtained during a three day visit. We intended to interview the Director of the Regional Office, the Assistant Director, the head of Compensation and Pensions, the head of either Loan Guaranty or Veterans Service Division, and the Training Officer, hoping for at least 45 minutes with each. At each of the five sites, our questions would vary with the responsibility held, but many of the questions were repeated, such as:

- Do you agree with the RFB rationale? Is it important to work harder to understand the circumstances of the veteran? Is it important to help the veteran to see clearly what his or her action options are? Are there some situations when it is impossible, or not in the veteran's interests, to write a simple letter?
- RFB is oriented to the needs of the veteran. What are some of the needs the letter writer is supposed to understand? Are some writers much better than others at figuring out what those

needs are? Can you identify anyone on your staff who would be really good at figuring out needs based on an incoming letter? Can those skills be taught to someone who is not so good at it?

- What is RFW doing for your people? What are the effects of the training? Are trainees creating better letters?
- To what extent should letter writing be standardized across sites? Are there regional conditions that work against standardizing letters?

In addition, all Regional Directors not visited were to be asked to complete a 20-minute survey drawing upon the same questions. And to get more of the Central Office perspective, there were to be occasional telephone calls for information and reaction, and then, at some later time, a conference call to respond to a few of the issues that deserved deeper interpretation.

Observation and Interpretation. At each of the sites to be visited, we wanted to observe extensively the work of staff members preparing letters and to spend several hours looking through the files. Analysis and interpretation were in part to be interactive, using an advisory committee and a meta-evaluation procedure for criticism and restructuring. Responsibilities for data gathering and interpretation were divided across the team as shown in the following graphic.