# The Evaluation Skill-a-Thon: A Model for Meaningful Youth Engagement in the Evaluation Process

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Evaluation is a crucial component in running successful and meaningful programs. A well-crafted evaluation can inform program facilitators on what in the program is working, whether the program achieves its objectives, how it does so, what participants do and do not enjoy, and more. This resource goes over the design of the Evaluation Skill-a-Thon, a programmatic tool which turns the evaluation process into an interactive event and easily facilitates involving youth participants in the entire evaluation process.

# Youth Participatory Evaluation

Youth Participatory Evaluation (YPE) is a relatively new approach that brings youth to the process of evaluating the programs which serve them.1 When utilized in positive youth development programs, YPE recognizes that youth, as the key program stakeholders, are able to provide important and unique insights on why data should be collected, what data to collect and how to do so, how to interpret evaluation findings, what findings indicate about programmatic changes, and more. Instead of asking youth participants to merely provide evaluative data (as when they fill out program surveys), YPE brings their expertise to more steps of the evaluation process, thus improving program evaluation and program quality. Employing the YPE approach is also important because it provides youth participants with a designated space to feel heard and supported by adult program facilitators (fostering deeper relationships) and increased ownership over evaluation results and program modification.2,3

# The Skill-a-Thon Model

Skill-a-Thons are a common tool used in 4-H programming to test participants’ knowledge in a participatory manner.4 The essential structure of the skill-a-thon consists of various stations featuring participatory activities through which participants cycle at a self-directed pace. The activities used in Skill-a-Thons were originally designed as hand-on tests of knowledge or skills, but they can be modified to fit any type of activity, including evaluation!

# The Evaluation Skill-a-Thon

The Evaluation Skill-a-Thon utilizes the skill-a-thon model to create a participatory evaluation experience in which youth can easily engage. It is designed to facilitate evaluation of a long-term program as an event at the end of the program season. Rather than stations that test participants, the Evaluation Skill-a-Thon uses stations that ask participants to reflect on and assess the program being evaluated. This event is ideal for bring YPE to your 4-H program because it scaffolds the evaluation process into clear and manageable steps which are easy to involve youth in and which can be modified to fit your program’s specifications/needs. These steps include:

1. Evaluation Planning & Design
2. Data Collection
3. Data Interpretation & Analysis
4. Sharing Results
5. Applying Evaluation Results: Planning Programmatic Change

Step 1 of this process occurs before the Evaluation Skill-a-Thon takes place, and is carried out either by program facilitators or in collaboration with youth participants. Steps 2-5 make up the Evaluation Skill-a-Thon event and are divided into different sections of the schedule. Step 5 can and likely will need to extend beyond the Evaluation Skill-a-Thon event as program facilitators carry out further program planning.

# Planning Your Evaluation Skill-a-Thon: Evaluation Design

The first step in planning your Evaluation Skill-a-Thon is determining “Evaluation Questions” that your evaluation will collect data to answer. Most likely these evaluation questions will cover the efficacy and success of your program. What are the program’s objectives; did the program achieve those objectives? What do youth enjoy or not enjoy about the program? What changes should be made to the program?

Youth can be involved in this step of the evaluation process by asking youth participants what they think determines whether the program is successful, what they look to gain from the program, what they think program facilitators would need to know to improve the program, etc. A team of youth could be involved as evaluation planners or the input of youth participants can be used by program facilitators during the planning process. If evaluation, particularly in this participatory manner, is new to the youth participants it’s likely that the latter option will be more pragmatic, but they may be interested in being more fully involved and can always be walked through the process to increase their engagement.

Once the evaluation questions have been determined, they can be used to design the skill-a-thon stations which pose those questions. One strategy that can be used is adapting traditional survey questions into hands-on activities. For example, stations could feature:

* Flip chart dot voting (ex. Which activity helped develop your self-confidence?)
* Give a grade (ex. Give the program a grade on developing your leadership skills.)
* Video testimonials (ex. Tell a story of a time when the program helped you connect with others.)
* Flip chart drawing/writing (ex. Draw what the program makes you think of.)
* Make a bar graph (ex. Fill in a bar graph of how much you agree/disagree that the program did “x”.)
* Create a summary newspaper headline (ex. Imagine & write a newspaper headline of a story reporting on the outcomes of this program in 20 years.)
* Create a summary hashtag (ex. Write a hashtag you would use on social media to describe this program.)

# Materials & Preparation

The materials needed to carry out an Evaluation Skill-a-Thon will depend on the station activities designed & selected. Potential materials would likely include:

* Printed instructions of each evaluation question/station activity
* Printed instructions on how to analyze the data collected from each station
* Printed instructions on how to interpret the analyzed data at each station
* Scrap paper for writing
* Pencils
* Flip charts / butcher paper
* Colored dot stickers
* Markers / crayons / colored pencils
* Video recording device (i.e. camera, phone, tablet, etc.)
* Calculators

To prepare for your Evaluation Skill-a-Thon, set up designated areas for each activity station. Determine how you would like to organize the activities. A suggested system is to divide the evaluation activities into two set (1 & 2) and set them up in two separate rooms or spaces. With this system, the group of participants can be split into two groups (A & B) with group A creating data for set 1 and group B creating data for set 2. Then the groups can switch activity sets/rooms with group A analyzing data created by group B for set 2 and group B analyzing data created by group A for set 1. Depending on the number of participants and the space available for your Evaluation Skill-a-Thon, you may need adapt the organization of activities, but the essential thing to maintain in your organization system. It will also be helpful to think of a system to organize and store the data and activity results (such as separate labeled folders) which you can use during and after the Evaluation Skill-a-Thon to avoid losing any data.

# Evaluation Skill-a-Thon: The Event

The actual Evaluation Skill-a-Thon event includes a schedule of activities that facilitate steps 2-4 and potentially step 5 of the evaluation process. The schedule of an Evaluation Skill-a-Thon could be organized as follows:

1. **Introduction** *(5 minutes)*: Explain the format of the event, review the reasons behind facilitating an Evaluation Skill-a-Thon (expressing the importance of evaluating the program in order to improve it according to participants’ experiences, needs, and thoughts), split participants into designated groups, ask if participants have questions.
2. **Data Collection** *(20 minutes)*: Explain that participants have 20 minutes to create data by carrying out the evaluation activities at each station. Participants can carry out the activities at their own pace and in any order according to their own priorities. Event facilitators can stand by for any questions and can encourage participants to carry out a particular activity if it hasn’t yet received engagement.
3. **Data Analysis** *(12 minutes)*: Have participant groups switch which activities/space and explain how to analyze data, providing any relevant calculation formulas. Depending on the evaluation questions/activities & type of data collected (quantitative vs. qualitative) analysis could include counts, sums, averages, etc. for or determining common themes. Again participants can choose which activities and what order they follow in a self-directed manner. Event facilitators can stand by for any questions and can encourage participants to carry out a particular activity if it hasn’t yet received engagement.
4. **Data Interpretation** *(12 minutes)*: In this portion, participants will remain in the same groups & activity sets/spaces from the Data Analysis portion. Each participant should select one station and use the allotted time to delve into the data and interpret what it indicates in regards to its corresponding targeted evaluation question. More than one participant may (and likely will depending on the number of participants) work at each station. Give participants a set of prompts to guide their discussion in determining the meaning of the data. Have participants record their interpretation results on a piece of paper.
5. **Sharing Results & Closing** *(10-15 minutes)*: Bring all the participants back into the same space and debrief the results of the evaluation activities. Have participants volunteer to answer questions about an activity of their choosing. Reflection prompts could include:
   * What did participants learn?
   * What surprised participants?
   * What did the data analysis & interpretation tell participants about the program & any changes that could/should be made?

Thank participants for their engagement with the evaluation and share what the next steps of the evaluation will be and how program facilitators will use the collected data.

# Follow-Up

It is important to share updates on follow-up steps from the evaluation with youth participants. This helps to demonstrate how their input was valued and taken into consideration and how their participation in the evaluation process impacted the program, fostering a more positive evaluation culture.

# References

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4. Ullry, L., & Wright, J. (2019). The Value of Skillathons. *News & Press: The Pulse.* National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals. Retrieved September 14, 2020, from <https://www.nae4hydp.org/news/457715/The-Value-of-Skillathons-.htm>