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A Guiding Typology for Site Visits

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Abstract

Site visits are an often-implemented, understudied activity that occurs in the diverse contexts where program evaluation is conducted. Further, the purposes of evaluative site visits are varied, ranging from provision of technical assistance and formative learning to high-stakes accreditation site visits. The purpose of this chapter is to set the stage for the rest of this New Directions for Evaluation volume by presenting a typology of site visits with examples that illustrate variations in the eight categories or characteristics of the proposed typology. The typology will help practitioners clarify their thinking around their own site visits and aid in the evaluation planning and design phase of their practice. Additional chapters in this volume will add to the typology by discussing various aspects of quality, procedures, and use of site visits. © 2017 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

I n the early 2000s, a large, federally funded, politically charged early literacy program called Early Reading First was being launched as part of the larger No Child Left Behind legislation. Awardees of this program were required to secure an external evaluation, as well as participate in the national evaluation of the program, which included an annual site visit. Melissa Chapman Haynes was part of the external evaluation team for a grantee in a rural Midwestern state. This was fortunate because this would be a first foray into on-the-ground training in site visits, which is the norm

for evaluators, as there is little mention of site visits in evaluation texts or chapters for students or practitioners. The site visit from the national evaluation team included the perspectives of the program staff, which were the primary focus of the site visit, and that of the external evaluation team.

At the same time, in a different part of the country, Nora Murphy, new to the evaluation field, was part of the Youth Standards Project. This initiative sought to develop a set of youth standards designed by and for youth-serving organizations with the intention of raising the quality of services available to youth and creating a common set of expectations for funders. Murphy worked with a team of evaluators and organizational staff to develop a site-visit protocol that would allow organizations and funders to use the standards to guide evaluations.

The details of these particular site visits are less important than the overall takeaway lessons learned from what were very stressful experiences, particularly for our clients running the program. They learned that site visits are often time-consuming, to some degree anxiety-provoking, and politically charged. In Chapman Haynes' experience, the particular site visit did not add value to the evaluation and did not seem to have any effect on the program beyond the preparation beforehand to showcase the best aspects of the program. In Murphy's experience, the tension between uniform expectations for conducting site visits and the need for contextual adaptations became clear.

Defining evaluative site visits is a formidable challenge, not only because they occur in diverse contexts for an array of purposes, but also because there is very little in the evaluation literature to serve as guidance (Lawrenz, Keiser, & Lavoie, 2003; Patton, 2015). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a framework for the types of evaluative site visits that occur, based on a literature review as well as our collective experiences as evaluators. It is our hope that this chapter and volume will spur conversations and further investigations into evaluative site visits and provide guidance for evaluators participating in, planning, or implementing site visits.

Construction and Boundaries of the Typology

Perhaps Alfred Nobel can provide some guidance to our development of a site-visit typology, as he said "One can state, without exaggeration, that the observation of and search for similarities and differences are the basis of all human knowledge" (Frängsmyr, 1996). The process of identifying typologies in qualitative sociological research is focused on identifying unique dimensions that are similar within group and distinct between groups (Kluge, 2000). This typology was constructed based on our personal and collective experiences as professional evaluators and a literature review from the fields of program evaluation, anthropology, sociology, education, health care, and international development.

Given that there is very little general guidance about the methods for conducting site visits in the literature, the review focused on providing examples, context, and exemplars to support the typology presented in this chapter. Further, during the literature review it became apparent that evaluative site visits are also referred to as field studies (Nightingale & Rosman, 2015), implementation studies (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012), or as field work. Our literature search included these terms. We will use the term *site visits* throughout this chapter to refer to all these types of studies.

What cannot be captured in a typology are the important roles that context, culture, and credibility play in site visits. Any type of site visit can happen in a school, clinic, or health care setting. But how should evaluators think about and attend to variations of context? The cultures of a clinic for military veterans, elderly nursing home residents, or youth experiencing homelessness will vary greatly. How does the site visit attend to these variations? What makes the site visit credible—from evaluator, to methods, to findings?
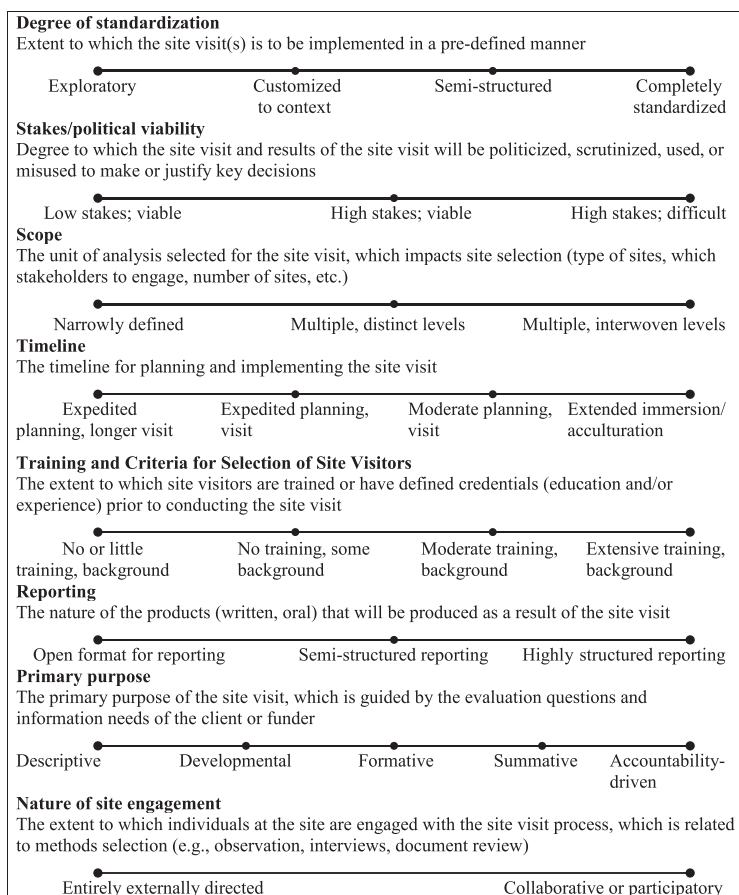
Typology

Site visits are conducted for a wide range of purposes that vary in the questions they seek to answer, when they happen in the life course of the program or initiative, what is at stake, and the degree to which the protocol is standardized or contextually specific. Based on a review of the literature and our personal experiences with site visits, we present a proposed typology with eight dimensions on which site visits may vary in a meaningful manner (Figure 1.1). We also present and discuss a continuum for each dimension. For example, "Nature of site engagement" can range from entirely externally directed to collaborative or participatory.

Each dimension is further detailed in the following sections with examples of site visits that fit within the continuum.

Degree of Standardization

The first dimension in the typology ranges from exploratory site visits, which have no standardized protocol, to accreditation visits in which the site visitors follow a highly standardized and detailed protocol. Between the extremes are visits that may be customized to a specific context and those that are semistructured. An example of a semistructured visit would be when the evaluator and program leaders identify individuals the site-visit team will interview and meet and the nature of those meetings is generally agreed upon but the processes and line of questioning are left somewhat open. A customized site-visit example is one in which an external evaluator is asked to conduct annual site visits to plan and facilitate logic modeling exercises with key program stakeholders as part of the broader evaluation planning and data collection.

Figure 1.1. Site-visit typology dimensions, definitions, and proposed categories.

Degree of standardization
Extent to which the site visit(s) is to be implemented in a pre-defined manner

Exploratory	Customized to context	Semi-structured	Completely standardized

Stakes/political viability
Degree to which the site visit and results of the site visit will be politicized, scrutinized, used, or misused to make or justify key decisions

Low stakes; viable	High stakes; viable	High stakes; difficult

Scope
The unit of analysis selected for the site visit, which impacts site selection (type of sites, which stakeholders to engage, number of sites, etc.)

Narrowly defined	Multiple, distinct levels	Multiple, interwoven levels

Timeline
The timeline for planning and implementing the site visit

Expedited planning, longer visit	Expedited planning, visit	Moderate planning, visit	Extended immersion/ acculturation

Training and Criteria for Selection of Site Visitors
The extent to which site visitors are trained or have defined credentials (education and/or experience) prior to conducting the site visit

No or little training, background	No training, some background	Moderate training, background	Extensive training, background

Reporting
The nature of the products (written, oral) that will be produced as a result of the site visit

Open format for reporting	Semi-structured reporting	Highly structured reporting

Primary purpose
The primary purpose of the site visit, which is guided by the evaluation questions and information needs of the client or funder

Descriptive	Developmental	Formative	Summative	Accountability- driven

Nature of site engagement
The extent to which individuals at the site are engaged with the site visit process, which is related to methods selection (e.g., observation, interviews, document review)

Entirely externally directed	Collaborative or participatory

Exploratory site visits are likely to be conducted when little is known about how program activities or an organization is operating. In this context it would not be appropriate or feasible to develop a highly standardized protocol. As an example, a series of exploratory site visits may be conducted for grantees that are given a small amount of funding to improve nutrition policies and practices in schools. The site-visit team may develop overall goals and guiding questions for the visit, but unless specific guidance or standards were provided to each grantee it would not be possible (or even appropriate) to develop highly standardized protocols.

The most highly standardized site visits may be accreditation visits, which are typically highly structured. For example, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) details specific steps the

site visitor must take as part of a site visit, including a review of program requirements and data that are submitted to the site-visit team prior to the in-person visit; interviews with the program director, faculty members, and residents; and review of the available data that were submitted prior to the site visit to verify and expand on that information.

The Council on Accreditation, an international nonprofit with a mission to develop and support accreditation of human services organizations, defines accreditation as "the formal evaluation of an organization or program against best practice standards" (Council on Accreditation website, June 1, 2016). Accreditation is defined as both a status and a process and typically involves a rigorous and standardized site-visit protocol.

Stakes and Political Viability

The second dimension focuses on the stakes of the site visit and includes the political viability of conducting the site visit itself as well as the impact of political pressures to misuse results. This dimension deals with the context and politics of the site visit, including the purpose of the site visit, who has requested or commissioned it, who will use the results, and how results might be used. Other factors that influence stakes and political viability include the potential for misuse of results and the competing interests of stakeholders, including funders and key decision makers.

At one end of the continuum are site visits with low stakes that are politically viable, meaning there is little evidence that the results will be used to make high-stakes decisions by the entity commissioning the visit, that there is a lower likelihood that results will be misused, and there is general support for the site visit among various stakeholders and key leaders. One example of such a visit would be a site visit for a broadly supported, adequately funded community health initiative, where the purpose of the site visit is to gather information through a variety of methods for program improvement. Although we can never entirely control or predict how results will be used, the focus at this end of the continuum is on improvement.

At the other end of the continuum there are site visits that have higher stakes, which may be either politically viable or challenging. Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, and Caruthers (2011) identified two sets of factors that should be considered when defining the context and ultimately the feasibility of conducting an evaluation or an evaluative site visit. The first set of factors is broader political influences at play, including economics, religious, and cultural values. The second set of factors is the background values individuals involved in the site visit bring to the site visit. It is the responsibility of the evaluator to engage in activities that will shed light on the stakes of the evaluation and the feasibility of conducting the site visit within the identified political context.

Scope

The third dimension, scope, involves the unit of analysis for the site visit. Site visits may be narrowly defined, attending to a preidentified component of the program or stakeholder group, or may be focused on multiple levels of an organization or multiple partners or stakeholder groups. Defining the scope necessarily defines some of the practical aspects of the site visits, including the number and type of individuals who will be involved, the depth of data collection and analysis, and the selection of methods. It may be the case that resources constrain the scope of a site visit to the extent that it is only possible to have a narrow focus, including only one level of an organization or a couple of stakeholder groups in an interview. However, a narrow focus may jeopardize the feasibility of the site visit, particularly if an interested group is excluded from providing input into the evaluation, and hence may ultimately resist the site visit and the evaluation, making it less feasible to implement.

Timeline

The fourth dimension concerns the time available for planning and implementing the site visit, ranging from expedited timelines to those that span an extended period of time. As noted by Patton (2014, 2015) it is too often the case that the timeline for site visits is brief. In some cases there are only weeks between the deadline for the request for proposal or other call for site visitors and the start of the contract. This compact timeline may increase the likelihood that unqualified site visitors will be hired, as many more qualified or experienced site visitors are not able to respond to the timeline or travel on such short notice.

Patton (2015) also noted that it is most commonly the case that the length of the site visit itself is brief, typically lasting a few days at most. In some contexts, a longer site visit may increase the accuracy and utility of information gained, especially in contexts that involve wicked problems or highly complex systems. This approach would be more akin to anthropological approaches such as ethnography. Although there are benefits to longer site visits, there is also tension between utility and accuracy of the visit and the feasibility of doing more extended site visits, given the available resources and the information needs of the stakeholders.

Because of the high cost of site visits, especially if considering extending the length of a site visit, it may be worthwhile to consider what we might learn from studying participant observation, an anthropological method that typically involves extended observation and data collection. It involves "going out and staying out . . . and experiencing the lives of the people you are studying as much as you can" (Bernard, 2006, p. 344). It usually involves collection of qualitative information, such as observations, and may also include collection of quantitative data. And although this method originated in cultural anthropological studies of remote tribes, it is also used today to

study areas with direct application, such as a study in the early 1990s about why consumers were not using credit card readers at gas stations (Solomon, 1993).

Training and Criteria for Selection of Site Visitors

The fifth dimension, training, consists of two components. First is the specific training that the site visitor might receive prior to conducting the site visit. Second are the credentials that the site visitor or the site-visit team may need to have, which may consider level of education and experience. At one end of the continuum there may be no stated requirements for training or background of the site visitor.

As a next step on the continuum, a site visit may require no specific training but there may be requirements for the site visitor's education or experience related to the context of the site visit. For example, requirements for an advanced degree in a particular field of study, practical experience within a certain context (e.g., as a teacher, in international contexts, working with specific populations), or years of experience conducting evaluations or evaluative site visits.

Sometimes there are requirements that the site visitor or team have extensive training as well as specific background or experience in a particular context or field. For example, the ACGME staff members who serve as site visitors must have ACGME-provided site-visit training. They are required to have extensive experience in the field of medical education, typically part of MD or PhD degree-granting programs; they must participate in two formal meetings each year; and attend specific meetings each year to maintain their credentials to conduct these site visits.

Reporting

The sixth dimension focuses on the nature of the tasks or products that will be delivered as a result of the site visit, including oral reports, written reports, or any summary of the process or findings of the visit. The extent to which reports and other deliverables are publicly available (or not) is also a consideration for this dimension. On one end of the continuum the nature of the reporting may be open with no required format for the reporting. A semistructured format seems to be most common for reporting the process and findings of the site visit. Site visits that evaluators conduct as a requirement of the funder or a request of the client are often structured. The evaluator typically writes a summary that includes the activities conducted during the site visit and the findings. There is often little additional required format beyond a deliverable deadline. On the other end of the spectrum, accreditation reporting is often highly structured, including checklists of activities that must be completed, standardized report formats that may include structured rubrics, and required details about the findings. Whether the format is open to customization or highly structured, it is

essential that site visit reports take into consideration the audience receiving reports and the intended use of the information, particularly the extent to which reports will be made public and the extent to which publicly available reports will be easy or difficult to access.

Primary Purpose

The seventh dimension should be driven by the information needs of the client and stakeholders, whether it is formally detailed in a structured manner prior to the site visit or something that the site-visit team needs to establish prior to the visit. Purposes may be descriptive, developmental, formative, summative, or focused on accountability—or some combination of these purposes. A descriptive site visit describes what is, what isn't, where it's happening, and where it isn't. The primary purpose is to describe and document, either for the site itself, the external agency requiring the site visit, or both. A developmental site has the purpose of documenting what is useful to support the development of an innovation or something being adapted to a new and novel context. A formative site visit is conducted during program development to identify when it is not being delivered as planned or not having the intended effects to modify the intervention accordingly. A summative site visit generally provides feedback to stakeholders at the end of the program or renders a judgment such as whether a site should be accredited.

Nature of Site Engagement

Finally, the nature of site engagement may range from those that are entirely directed externally with little engagement of the individuals on site beyond meetings or interviews to those that are highly collaborative and participatory. Accreditation visits tend to have less engagement with individuals at the site beyond observation of certain activities or programs in action or interviews with specified individuals. On the other hand, site visits that are conducted for the purposes of facilitating an activity toward the development of logic models will be much more collaborative in nature. Those at the site may be involved with providing input on the individuals or groups that should be involved and the design and implementation of activities on-site. The nature of engagement is highly related to the purpose and to whether the actual process of asking people to engage in the site visit is intended to stimulate change in the program, intervention, or initiative. As we move forward with applying this typology, it may be useful to learn from prior studies of process use (Shaw & Campbell, 2013) and how this may translate into our understanding of how individuals at the site being visited are affected by participating in an evaluative site visit.

Next Steps

The typology proposed in this chapter will be referenced and put into action throughout this volume. Future work that collects data toward refining or revising this typology will be an essential step in moving this work forward. It is our hope that the proposed typology serves as an initial framework in a broader conversation about site visits and that it will be refined and reworked as it is systematically held up against the practice of conducting site visits.

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