



Learning Evaluation Theory: Anderson's Value of Learning Model

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Introduction

Learning programs can have a dramatic impact on business performance, which is why high-performing organizations have more alignment between L&D and the business.¹ However, we've all experienced courses that were a waste of time. There are many evaluation models that outline different ways of assessing if our learning solutions actually work and why. It's the first step in making sure more of our future learning solutions work too.

The fourth whitepaper in our series on learning evaluation explores the Anderson Value of Learning Model and its usefulness to L&D departments. You can access earlier whitepapers in this series [here](#).

Anderson's Value of Learning Model

A more recent and lesser-known model, Anderson's Value of Learning was published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and is based on research from the United Kingdom's University of Portsmouth in 2006. It aims to address two challenges:

Evaluation Challenge

Many [organizations report](#) that they struggle to do evaluation well.

Value Challenge

Organization leaders often require evidence showing the value of learning and training as well as cost-effective deployment of resources.

The Value of Learning Model is a three-stage cycle that's intended to be applied at the organization level, rather than for specific learning interventions.

Stage 1: Determine current alignment against strategic priorities.

This stage evaluates how closely learning in your organization is aligned to your organization's strategic priorities—such as driving sales, increasing production, or reaching a new market. To what extent is your learning strategy supporting that focus? Achieving high alignment requires knowing your organization's strategic priorities and developing a learning strategy that supports those priorities.

Stage 2: Use a range of methods to assess and evaluate the contribution of learning.

This stage evaluates the contribution of learning to your organization via a range of measures. The model doesn't detail exactly what these measures are, but outlines four areas of evaluation that should be covered.

- **Learning function measures** - How effective and efficient is the learning function within your organization? This includes the learning team and anybody else involved in supporting learning in the organization.
- **Return on investment measures** - How much did particular learning programs and interventions cost, and how does that compare to revenue generated and/or costs saved?
- **Return on expectation measures** - To what extent have the expectations of particular learning programs and interventions been met? For example, if you implemented a program to reduce a particular business process by two days, you'd use this measure to determine if you were successful in actually reducing this process by two days.
- **Benchmark and capacity measures** - How do learning processes and performance compare to internal or external standards? This evaluation should be monitored continually in order to show progress or decline compared to earlier data.

Stage 3: Establish the most relevant approaches for your organization.

The model recognizes that organizations differ and, as a result, that the measures outlined in the second stage will be more or less important depending on the specific needs of an organization. For instance, some organizations already recognize that learning is important and want to ensure that they're investing in the right initiatives, but other organizations need to be convinced. Similarly, certain L&D teams focus on the short-term benefits of learning, whereas others are more focused on the long-term benefits.

That's why it's important to choose a blend of metrics that best suit your organization's needs. Use Table 2 to determine which measures mostly likely to align with your organization's needs.

Table 2. Anderson's Value of Learning Model

	Senior management trust in the learning contribution	The organization requires learning value metrics
Emphasis on the short-term benefits	Learning Function Measures	Return on Investment Measures
Emphasis on the long-term benefits	Return on Expectation Measures	Benchmark & Capability Measures

Focus on learning strategy

The Value of Learning model's focus on both learning strategy and alignment with an organization's strategic priorities is extremely helpful. For example, an organization might implement Kirkpatrick's model to evaluate a learning program designed to increase productivity of factory workers. The evaluation shows the program as a success if productivity increases. But what if that same organization already had surplus stock due to poor sales? That means the L&D department should have focused on upskilling the sales force to drive more sales rather than on increasing factory workers' productivity.

Assuming that same organization had sensible strategic priorities, an evaluation of how its learning program aligned with strategic priorities before starting a program would have identified that the program didn't match and resources would be better spent elsewhere. In other words, the Value of Learning model helps ensure you're not just delivering value, but you're also delivering that value where it's most critical to the organization.

Limitations

The Value of Learning model is deliberately high level and flexible, making it less useful in offering practical direction to specific evaluations. For example, the model encourages organizations to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of learning in the organization as a whole, but it provides little direction as to how to measure either effectiveness or efficiency.

In practice, this model must be combined with other models, such as Kirkpatrick's model, to achieve the detail of individual learning initiatives in order to paint an overall picture of the effectiveness of learning in the organization.

Value of Learning Summarized

- The Value of Learning model seeks to address specific challenges faced by organizations: doing evaluation well, providing evidence of value generated and providing evidence of cost effective use of resources.
- The model is designed for evaluation of the organization as a whole rather than individual programs. It focuses on alignment with the organization's strategic priorities, which ensures that the L&D department prioritizes the right areas.
- The model advocates a different blend of evaluation metrics for different organizations depending on the extent to which the value of learning is already recognized and the prioritization of short and long term benefits.
- Value of Learning is quite high level and needs to be supported by a range of evaluation techniques not detailed in the model.

Upcoming Publications

This is the fourth in a series of whitepapers covering learning evaluation theory. Other installments in this series will explore other models of learning evaluation, emerging technologies that can support learning evaluation, and a seven-step evaluation process that you can implement in your organization today.

About the Author



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With a background in instructional design and development, Andrew Downes has been creating learning content, experiences, and platforms in both corporate and academic worlds since 2010.

Now a consultant with Watershed, Andrew is a leading thinker in Evidence Driven Learning Strategy and Learning Systems Interoperability. Andrew helps organizations develop learning strategies based on evidence and evaluation, working with vendors to get at data from the products those organizations use.

One of the authors of the Tin Can/Experience API (xAPI) specification and much of the content on tincanapi.com, Andrew has delivered numerous presentations, webinars, and training sessions internationally. Andrew is well recognized as a reliable expert in the xAPI world.

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