Understanding Types of Evidence: A Guide for Educators

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This document was created as a resource for districts seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of educational technologies used in their districts. While the examples are focused on educational technologies, the concepts apply to other programmatic decisions undertaken by school districts or other organizations, such as adopting a curriculum or case management approach.
When making decisions about which technologies to use, you need evidence about which options are effective to make the best possible use of your technology budget. Many information sources, from marketing material to peer reviewed studies published in prestigious journals, present evidence of product effectiveness. The quality of this evidence can vary widely. This guide describes four key types of evidence you are likely to encounter and explains how to tell whether these types of evidence can provide strong support for claims about effectiveness. The types of evidence in this guide are ordered from weakest to strongest, and each evidence description is accompanied by examples of information sources containing that type of evidence.

**Anecdotal: Impressions from User Experience**

Anecdotal evidence consists of personal descriptions or claims based on one (or more) person’s own experience. This may include claims about a technology’s effectiveness or other features that are not necessarily related to effectiveness, such as user experience. This type of evidence cannot provide strong support for claims about the effectiveness of a technology because it is based on subjective impressions. However, anecdotal evidence may provide an indication about the context in which a technology might be expected to be effective, or aspects of the user’s experience that may enhance or reduce the technology’s effectiveness. In general, anecdotal evidence can help identify products that are promising enough to warrant more rigorous research.

**Common Source of this Evidence Type (follow link for example): marketing testimonials**

**Descriptive: Measures of Outcomes over Time**

Descriptive evidence summarizes characteristics of program participants and their outcomes over a period of time. This type of evidence is commonly found in marketing materials and news articles. Since descriptive evidence does not include a comparison group, it is impossible to know what would have happened without the program over the same time period. Therefore, descriptive evidence alone cannot provide strong support for claims about a program’s (or product’s) effect on the outcome of interest.

For example, an infographic may claim that an educational technology “gets results” because student achievement is higher after using the technology than before. But several other factors, such as traditional teaching or the introduction of a new curriculum, might be driving improvements in achievement. This descriptive evidence does not provide evidence about the technology’s true effectiveness, since we don’t know what would have happened in these schools if they had not used the technology.

**Common Sources of this Evidence Type: marketing materials, news articles**

**Correlational: Comparisons of Users and Non-Users**

Correlational evidence can identify the relationship between an educational condition or initiative, such as using an educational technology, and a specific outcome, such as student math test scores. This type of evidence can be useful as a starting point when learning about a
technology, but cannot conclusively demonstrate that a technology gets results. This is because it cannot rule out other possible explanations for the differences in outcomes between technology users and non-users. Correlational evidence is often misinterpreted and used to demonstrate success.

For example, a correlational analysis might compare a small group that used a technology versus students in the school district as a whole. Even if students who used the technology had higher year-end test scores, on average, than those who did not, there may be other important differences between technology users and the rest of the district that explain differences in improvement. Often, schools or students chosen to pilot a technology are a special group; for example, they may be highly-motivated students who volunteered to participate in a new program, or they may be low-achieving students who have been selected to receive several additional supports.

**Common Sources of this Evidence Type:** blog posts or news articles

**Less Common Source:** grey literature

**Causal: How to Accurately Measure Effectiveness**

Causal analysis is the only way to determine effectiveness with confidence. This type of analysis compares “apples to apples” by ensuring the only difference between the group that received the program and a comparison group is the program itself. An otherwise identical comparison group tells us what would have happened without the program; we can then say that differences in outcomes between the groups were caused by the program. There are several ways to create the comparison group needed to generate causal evidence, but a strong causal analysis must show that the group receiving the technology and the comparison group are equivalent in characteristics such as previous test scores and demographic characteristics. This equivalence is what convinces the reader that we are comparing apples to apples.

For example, strong causal evidence of a technology program’s effect on student achievement will examine differences in characteristics and test scores between students in the technology program and comparison groups before the intervention took place. This way, the reader can see whether the two groups are the same before the students began using the technology. If they are equivalent, differences in outcome scores between treatment and comparison students can be attributed to the technology. While a randomized controlled trial is often considered the “gold standard” in causal analysis, other methods can also be used to identify or create a comparison group.

**Common Sources of this Evidence Type:** independent evaluations

**Less Common Source:** news articles
Example of Anecdotal Evidence: Marketing Testimonials

These testimonials make different types of claims about DreamBox Learning® products based on anecdotal evidence.

“I was a huge supporter of bringing DreamBox to Stubbs Elementary after seeing a huge success with it while I was assistant principal at Oberle last year. We saw more than a 15% increase in our math scores in one year and the only thing we did differently was use DreamBox. Based on Stubbs’ State assessment data, closing the achievement gap in math is a priority. I am excited to see the impact it will have on our students here.”

-- Elementary School Assistant Principal

“My students love using Dreambox. They use it about 20 minutes a day. On average, my first grade class is working at a middle of second grade level.”

-- First grade teacher

“The Common Core Report is my favorite. It helps me to see exactly what areas the students are working on and passing. I can also see where they are having difficulty and spending more time. I use this data for small group time where I can focus on the specific areas that each student needs help.”

-- Second grade teacher

This statement indicates that the program is popular with students in this teacher’s class. This anecdote might stimulate the reader’s curiosity about the ideal amount of use per day, which could be assessed rigorously in a pilot. It is not clear how students’ grade level of work is measured or where they started at the beginning of the year.

This observation highlights one possible way the program could be used – to diagnose areas of difficulty in order to plan individualized instruction. A rigorous rapid-cycle evaluation could evaluate whether students of teachers who pair program use with daily small-group instruction outperform students of teachers who also use daily small-group instruction but without tools developed by DreamBox Learning®.

This testimonial indicates that the program raised test scores. A rigorous evaluation would be needed to make a strong conclusion about this. The assistant principal may not remember or recognize other changes that may have affected her students’ achievement; these could include changes in the student body, teacher experience, or other recent reforms.

Testimonials drawn from the DreamBox Learning® website.
Example of Descriptive Evidence: Marketing Infographic

Because the case studies do not include a similar comparison group, they are not able to provide information on what would have happened to student achievement without i-Ready.

Factors other than the use of i-Ready may have caused the changes in student achievement presented in these case studies. Therefore, the case studies do not provide strong evidence of i-Ready’s effectiveness.

Because they do not include a comparison group, these are descriptive analyses rather than correlational or causal analyses.

Infographic drawn from the i-Ready
Example of Descriptive Evidence: News Article

Like Ms. Lebron, school leaders in the 55,000-student Paterson district, and their counterparts across the nation, are learning the benefits of incorporating computer-based features into the reading curriculum to help teachers address their students' varying skills and experience.

During the 90-minute English/language arts block at Eastside High, for instance, each of the 15 students in the remedial class gets a chance at using a computer to strengthen basic skills, including decoding, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. An audio feature allows students to record themselves reading or listen to a taped version of the text. The activities bolster group lessons on grammar, writing conventions, and literature, and equip students for tackling grade-level reading assignments independently, educators here say.

In the course of the school year, Ms. Valenz said, nearly all the students advanced two grade levels or more in reading, and most had mastered 9th grade work, skills that have carried over to their other coursework.

Is this description strong evidence of the software’s effectiveness?

No. Other factors may have caused the gains. The article cites changes in reading level over time but the changes could be due to many factors besides the program. The lack of a comparison group that did not receive the software program prevents us from knowing what would have happened without it.

This article presents descriptive, rather than correlational or causal, evidence.

Excerpted from a news article on the Education Week
Middle school students participating in a personalized, blended-learning math program showed increased gains in math skills—up to nearly 50 percent higher in some cases—over the national average, according to a new study from Teachers College, Columbia University.

During the 2012-13 school year, students using Teach to One: Math gained math skills at a rate about 15 percent higher than the national average. In the second year of the program’s implementation students made gains of about 47 percent above national norms, even though some of those students were still in their first year of using Teach to One: Math.

Students using the program showed substantially higher gains than the average student nationally.

Is this conclusive evidence of the technology’s effectiveness? No. Other factors may have caused some of the gains. Since the comparison is not between groups constructed to be very similar, this is a correlational, rather than causal, analysis.

The follow-up study mentioned below is a more rigorous quasi-experimental study designed to provide a stronger answer about the program’s effect on learning.

Ready cautioned that the data in the study did not allow him to conclude definitively that Teach to One: Math caused the skills improvements. However, New Classrooms Innovation Partners plans a more definitive trial over the coming two years in the Elizabeth, N.J. public schools, Rush said. New Classrooms, in partnership with the Elizabeth district, received a $3 million federal investing in Innovation Fund grant to do that work.
Example of Correlational Evidence: Grey Literature

**Year Two Results:**
**Evaluation of the Implementation and Effectiveness of SuccessMaker During 2002-2003**

*Charleston County School District*

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This correlational study, conducted by a school district, presents information on the computer-based instructional program “SuccessMaker.” Is this information strong evidence of effectiveness?

The study reports that students who used the program were more likely to improve on the state test (the PACT).

The study compares SuccessMaker users to students at other Title I schools and to the district as a whole.

However, the study does not include enough information on whether program users and their schools were similar to non-users in the comparison groups. Although both groups were formed from “Below Basic” students, differences in other characteristics may exist. Additionally, it is not clear whether the background information provided in the text applies to the sample in Figure 4.

Differences in improvement may be due to SuccessMaker or other factors. This study does not provide strong evidence of effectiveness.

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Excerpted from a report on the *Charleston County School District*

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**Figure 4: Changes from 2002 to 2003 in PACT English/Language Arts Performance Categories for SuccessMaker, Other Title I Schools, and CCSD Students in Grades 3-8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SuccessMaker Students</th>
<th>Title I Schools</th>
<th>CCSD District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-99%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>50-59%</td>
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<td>40-49%</td>
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<tr>
<td>20-29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-19%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>0-9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>391 Students</td>
<td>2,666 Students</td>
<td>16,413 Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Diagram showing changes in performance categories]
Example of Causal Evidence: Independent Evaluation

This report provides experimental evidence on the impact of the DreamBox Learning® Math program on kindergarteners’ and first-graders’ math achievement.

Evaluation of Rocketship Education’s Use of DreamBox Learning’s Online Mathematics Program

Haiwen Wang
Katrina Woodworth

Exhibit 4 presents the means and standard deviations of the pre- and posttest scores (NWEA mathematics test scores in September 2010 and in January/February 2011) for the treatment and control students. The differences in pretest scores were in general less than 3 points, all within .3 standard deviations of the scores for the entire sample, and none of the differences were statistically significant at a .05 significance level, meeting the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards for a balanced sample.

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Exhibit 7
Summary of Regression Results for the ITT Effects on NWEA Mathematics Scores

As shown in the first row of Exhibit 7, DreamBox Learning® Math had a positive and statistically significant impact on tests of overall math skills and of measurement and geometry. The statistically significant impacts, marked with an asterisk, indicate that it is very unlikely that those differences in outcomes are due to chance.
This blog post presents information on the effectiveness of a technology called “Bedtime Math” – what type of evidence is presented?

“Students whose families used a free tablet technology to work through math-related puzzles and stories each week had significantly more growth in math learning by the end of the year.”

The article reports results from a randomized controlled trial – the gold standard in causal analysis. Students who used the technology were randomly selected, so the group of students who were not selected should be very similar to the group who was. Because we would expect these groups to be equivalent prior to the trial, any difference in outcomes can be considered the effect of the technology.

Therefore, this article – and the study it reports on – present strong evidence on the effectiveness of this technology among these Chicago-area students.

Excerpted from an article on the EdWeek
Improving public well-being by conducting high quality, objective research and data collection