

# the improve groove

## INTERNAL LEARNING SYSTEM: Participatory Evaluation

By Rebecca Stewart

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- 1 • Internal Learning System: Participatory Evaluation
- 2 • Experiences in ILS  
• From the Interns
- 3 • Institutional Review Boards  
• Company News
- 5 • FEATURED CLIENT  
Girl Scouts  
Research Institute
- 6 • Grants & Requests  
for Proposals

Internal Learning System (ILS) is an evaluation tool developed by Dr. Helzi Noponen. Dr. Noponen, now teaching at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, worked for a number of years with non-governmental organizations in India. The Ford Foundation asked her to develop a tool that could be used to do participatory evaluation with illiterate individuals. "Participatory" means that, instead of the data being gathered, analyzed and reported by an outside evaluator, the people involved in the target program share in gathering and making sense of the data.

With ILS, program participants keep a diary in which they document home, work and community aspects of their lives. Pictures are used to depict scenes and situations so illiterate populations can "read" the diary. Program participants draw lines, make tick marks or draw circles to indicate their present situation and progress. Diary users then share and reflect on their diaries in small self-help groups (often already formed in micro-credit and other similar programs).

ILS has been field tested with non-governmental organizations in the north and south of India. It is currently being expanded for use other sites in India and Honduras. Those using the diaries have ranged from people with lower levels of literacy to those who had to learn how to hold a pencil to make tick marks or draw a circle. So far, both the organizations and people using the diary have given positive feedback about its usefulness. The organizations can gather data using the diaries to provide program evaluation data to funders. At the same time, participants use diaries to reflect together on aspects of their lives, support each other to take action to address issues in their lives and record progress or change.

### ILS IN ACTION

One of the issues faced by program participants was domestic violence, and ILS diaries document domestic abuse with pictures to inquire about the experiences of diary-



Becky Stewart went to India to develop an ILS diary for the Handloom Weavers Development Society (HLWDS). Here she is with some staff members of the HLWDS.

users. As women in one self-help group circled the pictorial indicator, they began to support each other and intervene in cases of abuse. When one husband saw the abuse picture in the ILS diary, he tore it up and beat his wife. When the wife told her self-help group what had happened, the group came to the house and together confronted the husband, telling him how the diary was a means of accessing micro-loans, and that the group would be watching him in the future. Shamed by the exposure, the husband apologized and the wife reported he stopped beating her. The organization, working with these self-help groups, used data from ILS diaries to record a decrease in domestic abuse from over 60% to under 5% of its members experiencing it in a five year time span.

ILS can be most useful in circumstances where a population might have low or mixed literacy; in addition, it is most powerful when diary users meet in groups to reflect on their diaries and hold one another accountable. ILS could be useful in the U.S. when working with young children, groups of mixed-language speakers, illiterate or low literacy populations, or those who prefer to share information in a way other than in surveys or other traditional methods.

## IMPROVE GROUP GRANTS PROGRAM

The Improve Group is now accepting applications for our Corporate Giving program. We will provide grants between \$500 and \$1,000 to five organizations. We will take applications through October and make a final decision and distribute grant funds in November.

For more information on our Corporate Giving program, visit our website at <http://www.theimprovegroup.com/community.html> or contact Deborah Mattila at [deborahm@theimprovegroup.com](mailto:deborahm@theimprovegroup.com).

## MEETING SPACE AVAILABLE

The conference room in the Improve Group office is available for use by non-profit organizations for meetings free of charge, on condition of availability.

Please contact Deborah Mattila at [deborahm@theimprovegroup.com](mailto:deborahm@theimprovegroup.com) for inquiries.

## NEW OFFICES

On June 5 we moved into our new offices in Bloomington. Our new space has a number of advantages: a large conference room, plenty of space to grow into, and location accessible by LRT. We ended up with more space than we planned (which is a long story in and of itself - log onto our blog at <http://www.theimprovegroup.com/weblog/> for more information).

## Experiences in ILS

By Rebecca Stewart

I had the opportunity to work with the Handloom Weavers Development Society (HLWDS) in Balaramapuram, India this summer to develop a new ILS diary for weavers to use. With another graduate student from the Humphrey Institute, I spent 2 months working with the organization to understand the pressing issues facing handloom weavers.

HLWDS is a membership organization formed by weavers 15 years ago with a mission to rally the traditional livelihood of handloom weaving, an important occupation for many in this region of India, through micro-loans, training and advocacy. The ultimate goal is to develop handloom weaving as an economically viable occupation, particularly for the region's women.

It was an invaluable experience to put my training in ILS into action. I found it challenging to ask the right questions to tease out the many complications and aspects of a livelihood and society with which I was unfamiliar. We struggled through frequent power outages and slow-as-molasses internet connections, which made me appreciate the ease of work in the U.S. There were no PowerPoint presentations as we huddled around a few dog-eared print outs of diary



Photo Credit: Andrea Lindgren

A woman at work weaving a dhoti in one of the weaving villages of Kerala.

test pages during field testing. But, when the weavers told us that we had captured important aspects of their lives, I felt rewarded. As HLWDS was a pilot site for an early version of the diary, I was inspired by stories of how these weavers had already put those early versions of the diaries to powerful use - demanding due rights from their government, overcoming domestic violence and seeking new ways to market their products. It is an experience I will always remember; the sights and sounds of village life in India are still with me.

## From the Interns

By James Douglass and Asha Omar

As interns with The Improve Group, we have an interesting answer to the question: "So ... What did you do over the summer?" But before we answer this, we should explain how we arrived here.

Though we have different backgrounds, we share our involvement in the job readiness program STEP-UP, coordinated by Achieve!Minneapolis, a nonprofit that "galvanizes community resources to support student success" (<http://www.achieveminnneapolis.org/>).

Reflecting the varied backgrounds of Improve Group staff, Asha and James arrived with many experiences and interests. James is very active in the Boy Scouts of America, and is almost finished with his Eagle Scout. He enjoys video editing, silversmithing, and other artistic ventures.

Asha has been involved in the Somali community many years. She has volunteered at the Somalia Youth Camp, interpreting the Somalia language into English. Asha speaks fluent Somali and Arabic. When not volunteering or working,

she designs cultural clothing and plans cultural weddings. She has won many awards including Volunteer of the Month for the Somalia community.

As the nature of an internship can vary across and within companies, James' experience differed from Asha's. Asha's operational knowledge of computers and software is the one area in which her experience and knowledge increased the most. Now, Asha feels that she is ready for most computer-related tasks that may arise in the future - important in most business settings. James developed his knowledge of Excel, particularly in the area of data analysis. Most interesting and mentally challenging for him was the analysis for the Performing Arts Workshop project on which he worked alongside Nathan Paine.

Beginning this fall, James begins undergraduate studies at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY. Asha is attending Minnesota Community Technical College. We have enjoyed the opportunity to work alongside the Improve Group staff, and look forward to the future and what it may bring.



# Institutional Review Boards

By Deborah Mattila

If you have ever conducted a study that collected any data from or about people, and that was funded by the Federal government, you have probably had to acquire an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. You may also have been required to obtain IRB approval on research projects that were not federally funded. Even if you are never required to obtain IRB approval on other research projects, it can be worthwhile to have an IRB review your research methods to be sure they are sound, ethical and validated. The primary purpose of an IRB is to protect the safety, rights and welfare of people who participate in research, the human subjects.

An IRB is a group that reviews studies proposed by researchers. Each IRB is composed of researchers and community members.

IRB review occurs before research begins. In a typical evaluation project, this is after instruments and data collection protocols have been established, but before they have been implemented. Often, a continuing IRB review must occur in each year of multi-year evaluation projects.

The IRB process varies; typically a review begins with the submission of materials by the researcher, including all data collection instruments, informed consent forms and a full research plan. Over the course of a few weeks to a few months, the review board will review documents, request additional materials and finally approve or deny a research study. Sometimes, the review board may require modifications to the research design or that a researcher develop skills before approval of their study.

Some human subject research is exempt from IRB review. Studies conducted in common educational settings involving normal educational practices that use educational tests, surveys, interviews or already existing data are exempt if no identifying data (such as names or ID numbers) are used. Federally-funded human subjects research that involves surveys or interviews of minors is NEVER exempt from IRB review, but may be eligible for expedited review. In an expedited review, one or a few of the IRB chairs review the proposed research activity instead of the full board. It is beneficial to request an expedited review, if eligible, because you will receive a quicker response and the process is less costly. The conditions for expedited review are related to the risk-level and involvement of the human subjects in the research process. For example, studies using surveys that ask for opinions about pop culture would likely be eligible, while those asking for detailed personal history would not.

Although researchers, evaluators and program administrators might find the IRB process cumbersome and confusing, it evolved from the detailed ethical principles established in the Belmont Report, a summary of ethical principles identified by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1976. The Belmont Report was a national response to revelations about human research studies, such as the Tuskegee syphilis study, which raised concern about protecting individual rights in research. The basic ethical principles defined by the Belmont Report are: (1) Respect for Persons, or acknowledging the autonomy of each individual; (2) Beneficence, or maximizing benefits and minimizing harms; and (3) Justice, or a fairness in the distribution of benefits and risks.



This is Patrice. Patrice was a normal cub except for one difference...

While the other bears were out fishing, Patrice was studying multivariate analysis.



At first Patrice felt lonely and different from the other bears, but with encouragement from his parents Patrice continued studying until...

he became an ace evaluator, using his prodigious analytical skills for truth, justice and effective programs!

## Company News

By Leah Goldstein Moses

It has been a very busy summer at the Improve Group. We've welcomed new faces and places and said goodbye to some familiar ones.

### SUMMER INTERNS

This summer we welcomed two interns from the Achieve! Minneapolis Step Up! program (<http://achievinneapolis.org/>). James and Asha have written about their experience and what they've learned on page 2. What they didn't say is how much we've learned from them. Having them around all summer helped remind us how important support is as you make transitions in your life. They also did incredibly good work for us - we moved into our office just days before they started and they helped get us organized and settled. We'll miss them and are looking forward to hearing about their adventures in the coming years.

*(Continued on pg. 4)*



(Company News, continued from pg. 3)

### NEW STAFF

In June, we hired two new research analysts. Elizabeth Radel (Liz) recently completed her Masters in Public Health from the University of Minnesota where she specialized in epidemiology. Her evaluation interests are in programs for children with special needs and those that promote reproductive and sexual health. Liz joined us at the end of June and after just a week in the office left for China; she returned only to immediately head up to Itasca and Koochiching Counties. She provides wonderful perspective in her primary project of evaluating Minnesota's Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) programs for the Department of Human Services (DHS).



The Improve Group staff enjoyed their annual retreat at Hyland Lake Park in August.

Eric Wong, also a recent graduate of the University of Minnesota who completed his Master's in Public Policy in June, is particularly interested in economic policy issues. Prior to joining the Improve Group he conducted an analysis of projected revenue losses due to policy changes for the Minnesota Department of Revenue and researched the impact of need-based financial aid on academic progress. His economic background has proven valuable in thinking about expenditures in the HCBS program. His parents own the Golden Inn restaurant in Superior, WI, and he helps out there a few times each month. Between the HCBS evaluation and his travels to Superior, Eric definitely gets the most mileage of anyone in our office.



The Improve Group and DHS staff members visit many Minnesota landmarks on their travels for the Waiver Review Project.

### NEW PROJECTS

We have recently started three large evaluation projects. In collaboration with the Department of Human Services (<http://www.dhs.state.mn.us>), we are monitoring Home and Community Based Services in each of Minnesota's 87 counties and in several health plans and tribal governments. For this project we are reviewing implementation by each agency to ensure compliance with both state and federal laws. This project involves collection and analysis of data from staff, participant records, provider contracts and state system data. Starting in 2007, we will begin collecting data directly from participants in interviews or focus groups. This project is expected to last through 2011.

We have begun a new project with one of our long-term clients the Girl Scouts of the USA. In 2005, we completed an evaluation of their Girl Scouts in Detention Centers program and in June of this year we began an evaluation of the Project Anti-Violence Education (P.A.V.E.) program, offered by 26 councils around the U.S. and in Europe. We are collecting data from each council, using retrospective pre-test surveys with girls from 10 councils and success-case site visits to 6 councils. This evaluation focuses on personal growth and leadership development outcomes.

One of our long term clients, the Performing Arts Workshop,

(<http://performingartsworkshop.org/>) was recently awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Education for the ARISE project (Artist Residencies in Special Education), receiving the twelfth highest score among over 140 applicants. This four-year project includes an extensive evaluation using a combination of quasi-experimental and action-research methods. The ARISE project has an ethic of social justice and equity and the Workshop will be working closely with the San Francisco Unified School District to serve students who are disproportionately classified as having special needs.

### STAFF TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES

Congratulations to Deborah and Andy Mattila on their marriage! After a beautiful ceremony, they honeymooned in Belize (see our blog at <http://www.theimprovetgroup.com/weblog/> for more wedding & honeymoon pictures)

Rebecca Stewart recently returned from India, where she spent two months working with a local NGO in conducting a program evaluation. See her articles about her experience on pages 1 and 2.

Brooke Ahlquist trained and completed the Twin Cities Breast Cancer 3-day walk through much of the Twin Cities, starting at the Minnesota Zoo in Apple Valley and ending at the State Capitol.

### CONFERENCES

The Improve Group will be presenting in two conferences this fall. Our work with Girl Scouts USA has been selected by the American Evaluation Association (<http://eval.org/>) for a presentation on challenges and lessons in cluster and multi-site program evaluation.

We will also be working with DHS to present our work on the statewide HCBS evaluation at the 22nd National Home and Community Based Services Conference ([www.nasua.org/waiver-conference](http://www.nasua.org/waiver-conference)). Because the HCBS evaluation responds to a recently expanded requirement for state accountability in HCBS programs, we will provide details of the methods used and our findings so far to a national audience.

## WORKSHOP SERIES

Much of our client base comes from organizations that have funds, either targeted or as part of a program fund, specifically for research, evaluation and planning. However, we receive a number of phone calls from smaller organizations that want to do research, evaluation and planning but don't have specific budgets to take on those projects.

In response to this need, the Improve Group will be offering workshops on basic methods and tools. We are working with Aurora Consulting, Catalyst Consulting, DeYoung Consulting, and the Word Applied to develop a series for small non-profit and public agencies, and plan to roll the series out in January 2007.

Workshop topics will cover:

- Basic evaluation tools and planning
- Logic model design for programs and organizations
- Business writing, reporting and presentations
- Effective teams, meetings and work planning
- Building staff, board and volunteer leaders

The workshops will provide both learning and practical opportunities, and be applicable for staff and board members. Because these workshops are in development, we will offer the first series at a discount in exchange for detailed feedback from participants. If you are interested in either the series or a single workshop, please let us know by emailing Susan Murphy at [susanm@theimprovetgroup.com](mailto:susanm@theimprovetgroup.com).

## FEATURED CLIENT: Dr. James Riedel, Girl Scouts Research Institute

By Marian Kimball Eichinger

*James Riedel, Ph.D., is a Senior Researcher for the Girl Scouts Research Institute (GSRI). GSRI is a center for research and public policy information on the healthy development of girls. James currently serves as a liaison between GSUSA and The Improve Group which is conducting the evaluation of GSUSA's Project Anti-Violence Education (P.A.V.E. the Way).*

### **MKE: How long have you been with GSUSA and what do you do for them?**

**JR:** I have worked at GSUSA for eight years, beginning as a research and evaluation analyst in 1998. My primary work is program evaluation. I investigate the benefits to girls of participating in various programs. Some of the programs I have evaluated were designed to produce equity in science and technology; develop leadership and communication skills; or prevent youth violence.

### **MKE: What is your background and how did it bring you to the GSRI to perform research for girl-based programming?**

**JR:** I have conducted evaluations for 14 years. While my concentration is evaluation, the GSRI does original research studies and literature reviews as well. Examples of recent research conducted by my colleagues include:

- The New Normal? What Girls Say About Healthy Living (2006);
- Voices of Volunteers 18-29 (2003); and
- Feeling Safe: What Girls Say (2003).

I earned my Ph.D. in Measurement, Statistics and Evaluation at the University of Delaware. From 1996-1998, I evaluated government-funded initiatives in some of New York City's economically poorest elementary and middle schools, working directly with children and the adults responsible for their care and enrichment. My doctoral studies focused on the engagement of middle and high school children. I was always interested in education, be it through the formal K-12 system or the more non-formal Scouting opportunities.

### **MKE: Why is this topic of research important to you?**

**JR:** Girl Scouting has a 95-year history of doing wonderful things for girls. I believe in all of the initiatives of the organization. Anti-violence education is important because it cuts across every subgroup of humanity. It is a world issue.

### **MKE: Why is this research important for girls and our society overall?**

**JR:** The work of a girl-only organization is crucial, and our own research, *The Ten Emerging Truths* (2002), uncovered several reasons. Girls need empowerment and a climate in which they can connect with each other. This is supported through a "by girls, for girls" approach. Furthermore, certain topics are specific to girls and others are of a very sensitive nature, calling for the need of a secure, safe and comfortable place to learn and grow.

The mission of Girl Scouting is "to build girls of courage, confidence and character, who make the world a better place." It is important for girls that we measure the outcomes and the processes of their participation. Without demonstrating that the girls' involvement produces positive results, there are only gut-feelings and hear-say as evidence that membership is worthwhile. Girls, volunteers, staff and funders all look for more when deciding to what organizations they devote time and money.

For society, well, there are a lot of youth-development programs and extra-curricular activities that pre- and adolescent girls can get involved in. It is important to show that the program activities of the largest girl-serving organization in the world yield the growth that it purports to.

*For information about the Girl Scouts USA and studies by the Girl Scouts Research Institute, visit <http://www.girlscouts.org/>.*



## Upcoming Grant and Requests for Proposals

By Susan Murphy

*Honoring fall's arrival and the departure of our summer interns to their respective colleges, the Improve Group features the following grant opportunities in education. If you need advice on applying for grants or have questions about the notices listed above please contact Susan Murphy at [susanm@theimprovegroup.com](mailto:susanm@theimprovegroup.com).*

### THE EDUCATION FOUNDATION OF AMERICA (EFA)

EFA makes grants to qualifying non-profit organizations that have tax-exempt status and those that are not private foundations. Projects must be located within the United States. Areas of interest include, but are not limited to, the environment, reproductive freedom, theatre, education, medicine, drug policy reform, democracy, peace & national security issues and human services. Important characteristics considered by EFA are an organization's record of achievement, intended broad impact, sound financial practices, increasing independence, and correspondence with EFA objectives. Grant guidelines can be found at <http://www.efaw.org/Inquiry%20Guidelines.htm>.

### QWEST FOUNDATION

Qwest for Education focuses on enriching the lives of children by supporting solid preK-12 educational programs. They consider programs that:

- Effectively use technology to improve preK-12 public school instruction
- Promote innovative models to strengthen preK-12 public school education
- Improve the skills and leadership of educators and parents
- Promote innovative early childhood education programs

Requests are reviewed on an on-going basis and grants generally range from \$500 and up. To learn more about this opportunity visit <http://www.qwest.com/about/company/community/foundation/requestFunding.html>

### TOYOTA TAPESTRY GRANT PROGRAM

Sponsored by Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc. and administered by the National Science Teachers Association this fund offers 50 grants of up to \$10,000 each and a minimum of 20 "mini-grants" of \$2,500 each to K-12 teachers of science. To apply, qualified teachers must write a Toyota TAPESTRY proposal and submit it for receipt at NSTA by January 18, 2007. Grants are awarded in three categories: Environmental Science Education; Physical Science Applications; and Literacy and Science Education. Go to <http://www.nsta.org/programs/tapestry/program.htm> for more information.

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