

How Far Dare an Evaluator Go Toward Saving the World?¹

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No two professional evaluators are the same but many use similar methods. Still, each will use a method in a somewhat idiosyncratic way. Especially in the interpretation of data, personality and experience have a play.

Professional evaluators come from many backgrounds. They have greatly different aspirations. As a group they are considerate people. They are ethical. They follow disciplined procedures to find the merit and worth of a program or other object. Oh, a few are rogues. And a few sell themselves to the highest bidder. But most of us evaluators are good people most of the time. We are specialists at recognizing differences among greater quality and less quality. We hope that our work will contribute to the making of a better world.

While sitting in a waiting room, I overheard a young woman say, "I'm an evaluator now." Answered by "Don't you do consulting any more?" "Oh, yes, but I get more attention if I call it 'evaluation.'" Some evaluators call their work "evaluation" because it gets more opportunity to help make changes for the better. In large and small ways, they hope to help save the world. Perhaps this is a bit of false advertising.

One evaluator I know is passionate about discovering perfidy, particularly bureaucratic deceit. Another I know seeks to balance evaluator voices with teacher voices. As for me, I find myself digging into issues of continuing professional education, regardless of the questions prioritized in the contract.

Advocacies. Most evaluators claim to make dispassionate searches for quality and disfunction. They speak disdainfully of advocacy and promotion. Yet it is clear that many of us evaluators have strong feelings about certain matters and we promote those values in our work. Here are six advocacies common in evaluation studies:

- 1) We care about the evaluand, the object being evaluated. Often we believe in it. The *internal* evaluator is evaluating a part of his or her own organization. Barry MacDonald once said, "One should not evaluate a program if one does not support its goals." Seldom do we have a large conflict of interest, but often a *confluence* of interest. We hope to find the program working. We are disposed to see evidence of success.
- 2) We care about evaluation. We want to see others care about it. We want to encourage them to do it. We promote evaluation services, our own and those of our colleagues. We favor methods that evaluate well, and encourage others to use them too. It is an advocacy we flaunt.
- 3) We advocate rationality. We would like our clients and other stakeholders, our colleagues and heads of department to explicate and be logical and even-handed. We often pause in our data gathering or reporting to point out a way that the evaluand could have been run more rationally.
- 4) We care to be heard. We are troubled if our studies are not used. We feel evaluation is more useful if program participants take some ownership of the evaluation. Some of us, myself included, are strong advocates of self-study and action research. Even an external evaluation can profitably use input from stakeholders, including suggestions for design and interpretation. Some of us, not including myself,

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