

Improving Your Evaluation Skills through Reflective Practice

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You can improve your knowledge and skills in evaluation by reading professional literature; Sage Publications in the USA is an excellent source of evaluation materials, although most are written from a North American perspective. United Nations organizations and international development organizations publish materials which can be helpful.

Talking with other community development evaluators, or participating on evaluation teams for other development organizations, is helpful. Taking college or university courses in program evaluation can be helpful, but sometimes the theory taught in such courses is not grounded in the reality of community development work.

This paper describes an approach to professional development called reflective practice that I recommend for improving your evaluation skills. The essence of the approach involves analyzing your own evaluation experience in a critical way to devise more effective strategies for planning and implementing program evaluation exercises.

Basic Concepts

Three concepts are fundamental to understanding reflective practice as an approach to professional development: espoused theory, theory-in-use, and reflection. Each is described in the following paragraphs.

Espoused theory is a set of beliefs, values and assumptions concerning professional action that you can make explicit. In other words, espoused evaluation theory is what you say you believe about doing evaluation work in a professional way.

Theory-in-use is a set of beliefs, values and assumptions that actually guide what others observe you doing as you practice your profession. In other words, evaluation theory-in-use is the description of beliefs that describes what you actually do when you are doing evaluation work, as seen by others.

Reflection is concentration on, and careful consideration of, something. Concentration on something means that it is at the center of your thinking and discussion over an extended period of time. Careful consideration of something involves analyzing it in detail from a variety of perspectives to try to understand it at a deeper level.

Definition

Reflective practice is thoughtful consideration of one's own professional actions for the purpose of improving one's professional practice.

For example, the community development worker who does reflective practice deliberately analyzes his interactions in a community to compare what he did with what he believes he should have done to be effective as a development agent. The evaluator reviews her actions in planning and implementing an evaluation to compare the reality of her work with her philosophy/theory of evaluation.

Reflective practice is more than thinking critically about what I have done in my work. It is more than trying to do my work differently so that I act more consistently with some theory of action I have studied. It is a dialectic process of integrating what I believe about how to be effective as an evaluator with what I actually do during an evaluation. In this process my beliefs about effectiveness will change as I understand my work experience at deeper levels, and my ways of work will change as I extend my thinking about how to be effective.

Three Objectives of Reflective Practice

Objective 1. Distinguish between espoused theory and theory-in-use.

I identify differences or discrepancies between my professional intentions as an evaluator (espoused evaluation theory) and my actual practices (theory-in-use). For example, I believe that stakeholder involvement in the different phases of evaluation is directly related to the usefulness of the evaluation. Yet, I have done little to overcome some barriers to stakeholder involvement such as:

- Shyness in asking people with greater esteem or authority to spend time with me planning an evaluation.
- Reluctance to confront the conflicts in information needs among different categories of stakeholders.

Awareness of such incongruities between what I espouse and what I do can motivate personal change that leads to more effective practice.

Objective 2. Make tacit knowledge more explicit.

Theory-in-use, or the set of beliefs that guide what I actually do to plan and implement an evaluation, is often tacit, below my consciousness. I may be unable to articulate it. Through

reflection on discrepancies between espoused theory and theory-in-use, along with feedback from others who observe me while I work, theory-in-use can be made more explicit.

As I seek to make tacit knowledge more explicit, I can describe and clarify effective professional practices, so that others can learn how to practice them. For example, I can arrange information in a table so that it reveals patterns. But I have difficulty trying to describe the steps I take to arrive at an informative table. Talking with someone who has observed me create a table may help me explain in practical terms what I actually did. This explanation may help me and other evaluators create better tables.

Objective 3. Encourage collaboration and caring through dialogue among evaluators.

By sharing experiences and discussing them both compassionately and critically, I may develop greater understanding of and appreciation for the views of others. I also may understand my own views better.

Some Techniques

There are a variety of techniques that can be used for reflective practice. Writing, keeping a journal, preparing case records for problems solved, participating in contrived situations, processing external feedback, and platform writing and testing are described here.

Writing is often a reflective act. As we write we pause, review, reread, rethink the descriptions and ideas we are inscribing. Tacit thoughts become more explicit.

Effective evaluation report writing is much more than describing evidence. It should convey what the evidence means from the perspectives of different stakeholders. Reports become more useful as they describe outcomes of reflection on the evidence.

Keeping a **daily journal** while planning and implementing an evaluation provides a record of important events, interactions, and insights. This record can be analyzed later from different perspectives to clarify your theory-in-use.

Selected experiences can be documented in detail in your journal, and then analyzed to identify (a) important questions, (b) new concepts, (c) subjective reactions, (d) changes in thinking about how to respond in similar situations in the future.

A **case record** is a description of a professional problem that has been solved or is in process of being solved. The description includes (a) nature of the problem, (b) alternatives that were considered, (c) intended outcomes, (d) actions taken, (e) actual outcomes, (f) insights and conclusions.

Contrived situations allow me to compare my intentions with actual actions in a controlled setting. The exercise may be participating in a role play or other simulation experience, or

responding to a case study. Although they lack the complexity of actual practice, such exercises provide an opportunity for reflection on particular aspects of practice as it is convenient. They can be especially helpful in comparing espoused theory with theory-in-use.

Descriptive feedback from others who have observed me in action can stimulate reflection. Helpful elements of this feedback include (a) the reporter's reactions, including feelings, to my actions as they were observed, (b) the reporter's descriptions of how others reacted to my actions, (c) the reporter's ideas about my intentions.

Training people to provide descriptive feedback will not be easy, for descriptive feedback is different from other types of communication commonly used in learning situations. In particular, reflection is not facilitated by advice, judgment, constructive criticism, nor praise.

Advice is not feedback for reflection. It is a source of information imposed on me which may stimulate some thinking about ideas. But it probably will not help me identify or clarify my own values and beliefs. Such clarification is essential if I intend to make tacit ideas and beliefs more explicit, to make espoused theory more consonant with theory-in-use.

Neither judgment nor constructive criticism are feedback for reflection. They tend to make me defensive, to solidify my thinking, rather than encourage me to challenge my thinking. They are appropriate forms of communication in some settings, but they will not facilitate reflective practice.

Praise will solidify my thinking, not challenge it.

The basic principle is that feedback which helps reflection must be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Developing skill in providing descriptive feedback rather than prescriptive feedback is itself a topic for reflective practice.

A **platform** is an espoused theory. ("Platform" is a term used by USA political parties to refer to the principles or intentions which should guide action of those party members who are elected to represent some segment of the USA population.) Platform writing and testing is an extended disciplined exercise to identify the assumptions and beliefs that guide one's intentions for professional work.

A provisional structure of professional issues can be used to start thinking about one's platform, but it should not be allowed to constrain thinking as the exercise continues. For example, Exhibit 1 illustrates how Stephen Covey's Seven Habits can stimulate thinking about a platform for evaluation.

Exhibit 1. Covey's Seven Habits for Highly Effective People
Implications for Program Evaluation Work

The seven habits are described in detail by Stephen R. Covey in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Habit 1. Be proactive.

Is my evaluation work based on carefully chosen principles and approaches that are consistent with my core values?

Habit 2. Begin with the end in mind.

Have I articulated my philosophy of evaluation in a way that is consistent with my personal mission statement?

Habit 3. Put first things first.

Do I say no to relatively trivial needs for information, and concentrate my attention on those information needs related to the ultimate program aims?

Habit 4. Think win-win.

Do I seek mutual benefit as I facilitate evaluation work teams, and as I articulate the findings of evaluation work?

Habit 5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Do I listen to stakeholders carefully, and validate what I hear with them, before I present my own views on the task?

Habit 6. Synergize.

Do I seek out different opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives of stakeholders and colleagues, and then value them as I plan and implement evaluation activities?

Habit 7. Sharpen the saw.

Am I engaged in continuous improvement of my evaluation knowledge and skills, in relation to the physical, mental, spiritual and social-emotional dimensions of my life?

Platform writing is facilitated by guided small group discussion. This discussion is focused on (a) internal consistency and inconsistency, and (b) description of underlying assumptions which have not been stated. Versions of evaluation platforms could be topics for discussion by various technical specialists and groups of community development facilitators.

Platform testing is the testing of various "planks" in the platform. (In USA politics "plank" refers to a specific segment of a party's platform.) This testing takes place over a period of time, using various techniques as opportunities appear. For example, planks in an evaluation platform related to evaluation design and reporting could be tested with help from colleagues who read my evaluation reports. Planks related to field work could be tested during a field visit by asking evaluation team members to provide external feedback at selected points during the visit.

Using these techniques should improve the relationship between your espoused theory and your theory-in-use.

For Additional Information

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