Evaluation as public learning.
Position paper for the Session Evaluation as Education

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Introduction

This paper was written in response to Thomas Schwandt’s introductory paper “Learning and evaluation as a social enterprise” for the session Evaluation as Education, presented at the EES conference in Seville, 2002 (see conference abstracts). I recommend any potential reader to relate what is written here to his text as well as to the texts of Tineke Abma and Jennifer Greene, the two other contributors in the session. A process of creative dialogue among the four of us generated the questions raised in Thomas Schwandt’s introduction and my short paper was written after that process.

Points of departure

In order to engage in the discussion around the particular themes and questions generated for this session about evaluation as education, I need to present my view of some of the fundamental concepts.

I view evaluation as a social practice that is part of our contemporary way of coming to term with uncertainty in our efforts to organize society. For me, personally, evaluation is mainly a question of critical examinations of public programs, public policies, public enterprises, etc. This does not mean that I do not recognize other types of evaluation. It simply means that my normative position has to be understood basically from such a perspective. My ideas of evaluation are therefore directly connected to issues of democracy and democratic values. I believe there are certain democratic values that are not negotiable, like social justice, respect for human life and the equal value of individuals, care for others and solidarity with those less advantaged, empathy, openness, inclusion. Those values override the democratic right of self-determination. Educating democratic values is essential in order to guard against dictatorship and different kinds of oppression. In a vital democracy, critical examination, openness, transparency and the liberty to engage in conversations are necessary conditions to ensure trust and possibilities for change. Democratic political processes also require knowledge of various kinds. Learning and teaching are therefore essential for democracy.

Learning and evaluation as a social enterprise

In all educational activities, learning is central. My view is that learning is also central in evaluation. Learning, I understand as the continuous process of understanding the world, and yourself as a human being in the world. As such it is basically a process dependent on social relations and contexts but not determined by them. Vygotsky and Leontjev have both contributed to my view of learning as a dialectic process where the individual learns about subject content, social (power) positions, production and reproduction “techniques”, aesthetic and moral values, by and through social interaction, and by and through human activities in their particular contexts. At the same time, the individual is an active subject constructing new activities, contexts and understandings with other subjects. Learning often, but not always, entails confronting existing conceptions of the world with new ones so that other (reconstructed, reorganized) conceptions and understandings emerge (Jerlang, 1999; Garrison, 1995; Glassman, 2001).
A living democracy is dependent on learning processes to take place, to see and understand the world in new ways, in order to find solutions to social and environmental problems, how to live decent lives without the destruction of others, and to find ideas of how to build a good society.

In my opinion, evaluations of today too often work within taken-for-granted ideas/understandings of both the evaluand, the political context of the evaluand and the evaluation itself. This means that the role of many evaluations is to reproduce already existing views of what the program is to achieve and how this is best carried out. It also means that many evaluations may be part of reproducing political contexts and power relations that can be contra productive to the goals the programs are aimed to achieve.

The educative potential in evaluation comes with the possibility to present "alternative"/critical conceptions of the evaluand, and ideally of the evaluation’s own role in relation to the evaluand and its context. In that respect evaluation becomes one of several parts in a "public conversation" which is necessary to maintain in a democracy. Hard to attain, but perhaps possible if the context, preconditions, implementation and results/impact of the evaluand are studied. Theories about the evaluand and about democratic values can help in this critical endeavour. A leading question can be: What happens in what seems to be happening? Answers need to be related to the kind of democratic values endorsed in the evaluation.

**Nature of teaching-learning relationship in evaluation**

Teaching and learning are cognitive, social, moral and aesthetical processes, and other humans are necessary in both types. Not always face-to-face, but to act and react upon and get feedback from. Thus, teaching and learning are dialogic and are culturally mediated acts of meaning making communicated in various ways (for an example concerning texts see Smagorinsky, 2001). This means that learning takes many shapes, and that teaching (in order to be a more or less planned educational activity) needs to take several kinds of learning into consideration and use flexible forms to handle the content. Thus, teaching is both linked to different kinds of learning and to different kinds of content. Since my view of evaluation is that it is closely connected to politics and that democratic values are highly important, I endorse forms with the overall aim to enhance democratic values before democratic rights. Dependent on the evaluation context and its intrinsic power relations, it may in practice mean different forms, but they commonly entail taking particular care to incorporate knowledge about those groups that lack power in more systematical ways.

Teaching and learning are processes that permeate the entire evaluation process, from initiation to evaluation utilization and impact. This means that not only are things about the evaluand learned, but "meta-learning" also takes place (compare to the notion of the hidden curriculum). Meta-learning means that learning about moral and aesthetic values, power relations and about the evaluation itself and values it endorses, also takes place. Teaching in that respect means that certain values are always taught (along with subject matters), but perhaps unconsciously.
Content/subject matter of learning in evaluation

As said above, all sorts of content is learned and taught in evaluation as in any education activity. Typically, I think lots of evaluations are focused on new information, defined here as “being made aware of features of program implementation, demographics, outcomes, performance data, barriers to success, and so forth”. However, even this supposedly neutral content carry values and moral standpoints, albeit implicitly. My view is that evaluation ideally should deal with all kinds of contents, both more information like content and content that deals with understanding, meaning making, politics and values in the program and its context. Certain information and knowledge is needed in order to develop more complex understandings and to be able to address the politics of a program. In reality, collecting data/information to do so is a large task. Often help has to be brought in to the evaluation process by already existing studies and theories of the field in question or about issues of power and democracy. Personally, with my interest for evaluation as a critical examination in a more political sense, I would try to ”go for” more complete understandings and addressing the politics of the program. I recognize the political role of evaluation and would also prefer to incorporate such content in the teaching-learning processes. Transparency both of programs, their evaluations and the entire context is of public, and hence democratic interest. We should try to be as honest as possible. To sustain transparency and public debate may be dealt with by carrying out metaevaluations. So, an additional type of content could be to teach and learn about evaluation itself and how to handle its power dimensions.

Teachers and learners in evaluation

From what has been said above it should by now be clear that evaluators and others involved and touched by evaluation can be both teachers and learners. In one respect though, I think of the evaluator as more of a teacher. Again, if teaching is defined as a more or less planned educational activity (which I think is correct), I believe the evaluator has the main responsibility for the planning. This may mean to involve others in the evaluation process; it may mean to do it yourself. This depends on the power relations at hand and on what kind of democratic values that is most in need to be enhanced in the particular evaluation process. Learning is always taking place, but the what, how and for whom questions need to be thought over by the evaluator in advance.

To accept to be an evaluator or to accept to be a teacher means to accept responsibility. If the evaluator gets paid for the evaluation, she/he takes responsibility and also has the authority to try to find the best way to carry out the evaluation. By choice of the evaluator, and if possible and feasible, others, like stakeholders, can share responsibility, authority and payment, like in a typical Swedish public commission.

In a similar fashion, the evaluator is responsible for the teaching, but since learning in one sense is highly individual, it can be an overwhelming responsibility to insist on the evaluator also being responsible for all possible individual learning. The values, procedures and subject content brought forward, are of course the responsibility of the evaluator, like in all educational activities.
To summarize, I think it is better to be aware of what you like to promote and how you think this is best done, than to pretend that there are no particular values conveyed in an evaluation, even though you can not be sure of what kind of learning that will occur. Then, it is at least possible to openly explain what your position is.

References


