

The professionalization of evaluation in Canada

Notes for a presentation by **Benoît Gauthier**, President of the Canadian Evaluation Society, during the Forum 6 of the *Forum International francophone de l'évaluation*, held in Dakar, on October 28th, 2014.

Using the term "profession" alongside the term "evaluation" is, within official Canadian literature, a relatively recent occurrence. In 2005, when we were preparing a questionnaire on evaluation practice in Canada, some questioned this label [1]. In practice, however, the situation was quite different. This 2005 survey showed that 82% of participants agreed that "evaluation was a profession". This proportion grew to 88% in 2010 and has since remained at this level [2][3].

I intend, in this presentation, to describe the main milestones of the institutionalization of evaluation as a profession in Canada, and to analyze the essential elements of the underlying dynamic, the pitfalls met along the way and obstacles which we continue to face.

Milestones of the institutionalization of evaluation as a profession in Canada

Picciotto suggests that a profession requires five traits [4]:

1. Prestige and status
2. Ethical dispositions
3. A specific expertise
4. Professional autonomy
5. A form of official recognition

The order in which these traits take shape varies. Where the emergence of professions is concerned, Neal and Morgan [5] suggest that the United Kingdom and Germany represent two entirely different approaches. In the United Kingdom, professionalization was established from the bottom up, from professional associations towards professional status. In Germany, professionalization happened from the top down: a strong public administration allies with its jurisprudence giving the state control over the definition of professions.

In Canada, the British model prevailed for evaluation. Professionalization has taken root in the development of the Canadian Evaluation Society. The main milestones are:

1. the development, and eventually, the redevelopment of a four-day basic training series in evaluation called the Essential Skills Series;
2. the development of a code of ethics which focuses on competency, integrity and accountability;
3. the adoption of standards for evaluation which are focused on usefulness, feasibility, appropriateness, precision, and responsibility, first developed in the United States and adopted internationally;

4. drafting of a referential for the competencies necessary for practicing evaluation within the Canadian context and which includes five domains: reflective practice, technical practice, situational practice, management practice and interpersonal practice; and,
5. the development of an accreditation program for professional evaluators.

In 2008, the Consortium of Universities for Education in Evaluation (CUEE) was created in order to build up graduate studies in evaluation in Canadian universities. The Canadian Evaluation Society works in partnership with the CUEE.

It is extremely important to note that the steps taken in Canada to achieve professionalization have gone entirely against the three most frequent criticisms about the process:

1. Professionalization is often tainted by the views of only a few, which are imposed on the profession as a whole. The Canadian approach, as documented by Cousins and his colleagues [6], is characterized by openness, discussion and compromise.
2. Professionalization is often defined as a desire to exclude certain practitioners and to exercise a monopoly. The philosophy chosen by CES has been, on the contrary, to include the most practitioners possible, through flexible processes, and definitions which take into consideration the diverse nature of evaluation practice.
3. Professionalization is perceived by some as a method of controlling access to a profession. On the contrary, CES has built a professional title, that of Credentialed Evaluator, which celebrates competence in evaluation while not impeding practice by non credentialed persons or the emergence of new approaches.

Main elements of the underlying dynamics

In a soon to be published article, a research team of which I am a part, reviewed literature pertaining to the impacts of professionalization as seen from the angle of CES Credentialing Program. Besides the main pillars which are ethics, standards and competencies, the model identifies many variables which may affect the ability of such initiatives to produce positive results for the profession and for the public. Here are a few:

1. There must be a need for the professional expertise in question.
2. An organized offer of professional expertise must exist.
3. The proposed professionalization model must meet the needs of the targeted professionals; CES has adopted a professional accreditation approach.
4. The association which offers the professional recognition must be credible.
5. The method chosen must prevent those who are not qualified from obtaining recognition.
6. The mechanics of professionalization must focus on maintaining competencies; verification of professional development activities is necessary.
7. Credentialed professionals must experience a positive feeling of belonging to the group; this may take the form of external signs such as adding a title to a signature.
8. The credentialing mechanism must be marketed to those who are in contact with evaluators.
9. The professional association stays in touch with its field and adjusts its practice.
10. Eventually, mechanisms for managing complaints and sanctions may become necessary.

Pitfalls encountered and current obstacles

It can be said that the professionalization process has been, for CES, generally successful from 2006 to the present. However, certain obstacles were met along the way. Here are six:

1. It is difficult to ensure that sufficient and varied training is available to support professionals in attempting to obtain their credentials and to maintain their competencies.
2. The accreditation model chosen by CES suits beginner professionals but experts should be recognized through certification rather than accreditation, a step which has not yet been undertaken by CES.
3. Certain organizational sub-cultures are sufficiently strong to become self-sufficient or, at the very least, to reduce the need for professional titles. In Canada, this is currently the case in the federal public service.
4. A circular dynamic exists where the interest of evaluators for professional designation is fed by the professional recognition of the profession by its users (employers, ordering parties) but that this recognition requires sufficient critical numbers of credentialed professionals. It remains necessary to find a way of directing this vicious, or virtuous, cycle into an upward spiral.
5. Established professionals are less likely to feel the need for formal professional accreditation but their participation is necessary.
6. CES has created and implemented a professionalization strategy thanks, mostly, to the volunteering efforts of a large number of its members. This type of model is constrained because volunteer energy is limited.

Results to date

In addition to adopting a code of ethics, evaluation standards, and a competency framework, the efforts generated by CES have led to 271 credentialed evaluators which represent somewhere around a quarter to a third of the potential population of Canadian evaluators. The results of an April 2014 survey show that the majority of members favour the designation program and that the vast majority of credentialed evaluators give the program credit for many positive effects on their practice, even if the basic comparison of answers by accredited members and non accredited members shows few differences. CES will conduct a formal evaluation of the designation program in the next few months, during the program's fifth year of operation.

Conclusion

The path taken by CES in the last eight years has been long and demanding but it has allowed a consensus to arise: evaluation is a profession. This success is attributable to the hard work of many evaluation professionals but it would never had taken root if the environment had not been ready, mature, and self-assured. This confidence has developed over time, through a strong association, through the lessons learned from others' international experiences, through professional development, but mostly, through the increase in the number and in the visibility of professionals calling themselves evaluators and eventually professional evaluators.

Références

[1] Benoît Gauthier, Shelley Borys, Natalie Kishchuk and Simon N. Roy (2006). "Evaluation practice in Canada: results of a national survey", *Revue canadienne d'évaluation de programme*, vol. 21, no 3, special issue 2006, pages 1-42.

- [2] Benoît Gauthier, Simon N. Roy, Natalie Kishchuk and Shelley Borys (2010). "With a Little Help from Our Friends: A Study of Evaluators' Networks", presentation prepared for the Canadian Evaluation Society's 2010 Conference, Victoria, May 2010.
- [3] Benoît Gauthier, Natalie Kishchuk, Shelley Borys and Simon N. Roy (2014, to be published). "The CES Professional Designations Program: Views From Members", *Revue canadienne d'évaluation de programme*, vol. 29, no 3, special issue 2014.
- [4] Robert Picciotto (2011). "The logic of evaluation professionalism", *Evaluation*, vol. 17, no 2, pages 165-180.
- [5] Mark Neal and John Morgan (2000). "The Professionalization of Everyone? A Comparative Study of the Development of the Professions in the United Kingdom and Germany", *European Sociological Review*, vol. 16, no 1, pages 9-26.
- [6] J. Bradley Cousins, Jim Cullen, Sumbal Malik and Brigitte Maicher (2009) "Debating Professional Designations for Evaluators: Reflections on the Canadian Process", *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, vol. 6, no 11.

Web Resources

CES Code of ethics, <http://evaluationcanada.ca/ethics>
Evaluation standards, <http://evaluationcanada.ca/evaluation-standards>
Competencies for Canadian Evaluators, <http://evaluationcanada.ca/competencies-canadian-evaluators>
Designation program, <http://evaluationcanada.ca/fr/titre>
Consortium of Universities for Evaluation Education, <http://www.evaluationeducation.ca>