

A GOOD START, BUT WE CAN DO BETTER

Andy Rowe
ARCEconomics

Abstract: This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* provides a valuable overview of competencies and introduces some of the evaluation competency efforts around the globe. Competency efforts and this issue are unquestionably good things. This brief comment reflects on how future efforts could be improved by articulating the program logic and mechanisms of how the use of credentials will contribute to improved evaluation, thus ensuring that national variation in evaluation is integrated into competencies, that the reach of competencies is expanded to anticipate emerging opportunities and needs, and that important traits and characteristics beyond what can be gained from training and experience are included in competencies.

Résumé : Ce numéro spécial de la *Revue canadienne d'évaluation de programme* donne un aperçu précieux des compétences d'évaluateur et une introduction aux efforts d'établissement des compétences d'évaluateur à travers le monde. Les efforts d'établir les compétences et ce numéro là-dessous sont incontestablement de bonnes choses. Ce commentaire considère comment améliorer les efforts futurs en articulant la logique de programme et les mécanismes de l'utilisation de l'accréditation, ce qui contribuera à améliorer l'évaluation et permettra d'assurer que la variation nationale en matière d'évaluation est intégrée dans les compétences, que la portée des compétences est élargie pour anticiper les opportunités et les besoins émergents, et que les traits et les caractéristiques importants, au delà de ce qui peut être obtenu à partir de la formation et de l'expérience, sont inclus dans les compétences.

My comments are strongly informed by my membership on the National Council and my time as President of the Canadian Evaluation Society during the initial discussions of certification 15 years ago and as a critic of the determined certification undertaking of CES National Council about 10 years later. In pursuit of transparency, I want to declare this background and add that I have not

been an avid tracker of the various competency initiatives that have emerged, nor am I a fan of the Canadian credentialing effort. But I am an evaluator of over 30 years standing, have moderate status in the evaluation community, care deeply about the mission of evaluation, and am keenly aware of the many serious shortcomings of contemporary evaluation efforts, including my own. I want to thank the editors for asking me to comment on this issue. It has caused me to reflect, read, and catch up and helped me move from the past to consider the future.

I cannot imagine opposition to understanding and articulating the desired competencies for those who engage in the several aspects of evaluation—commissioning, undertaking, using, researching, and teaching. Clearly, the collective and individual rationales for knowing competencies are unassailable. However, from that starting point, many directions and processes are possible. As this special issue illustrates, there has been a range of consultative approaches and formulations of competency; personally, I would have enjoyed and benefited from participating in the New Zealand consultation. The utility of the original Minnesota work is also clear and provided a good foundation for what followed, much as this special issue will usefully contribute to the further development of competency efforts. With this in mind I offer some improvement-focused comments and observations.

There is a general absence of program theories that show how competencies contribute to resolving the concerns that gave rise to the need for competencies and the mechanisms (such as certification, professional development, and selection) that can lever change (see Table 1 in Wilcox and King in this issue for a useful inventory of some options). The Aotearoa New Zealand article sketches an elementary logic, with professional development and self-assessment as the key mechanisms. South Africa will use the competencies for consultant monitoring, evaluation staff selection, and performance assessment. Canada has instituted credentials presumably as confirmation that an evaluator has met a minimal standard. There is no doubt that knowing what a competent evaluator might look like is useful guidance for professional development and selection, but one might be skeptical that training, selection, and self-improvement are truly influential mechanisms of change that will improve the quality and utility of evaluation efforts. This is why we do theories of change—so that our work is actually salient to the mechanisms of change and those with influence over these mechanisms. I expect that any

move toward institutionalization of competencies will expect verifiable, defensible, and easily comparable and accepted mechanisms. Clearly, this will favour formal qualifications through academic or professional association venues. I am not confident this augurs well for evaluation as a practice, although it could certainly improve appearances. Articulating the mechanisms of change will help avoid overly simplistic responses.

As a practitioner first and method developer secondarily, I am drawn to the differential-psychology framework approaches to competencies discussed by Wilcox and King in this issue, which build on the essential characteristics of high-performing evaluators. This would be a significant undertaking well beyond what has been feasible for any of the current initiatives, but I look forward to what I hope will be the next stage, with more conceptual and empirical inquiry into what is a good evaluator, evaluation manager, evaluation teacher, and researcher, all of which are different from a suitably trained or experienced evaluator. (In this I appreciate the contribution of the South African article distinguishing the competencies required for different evaluation functions and types of evaluation.) I am hopeful that as the several competency approaches adapt and new ones are launched, they will expand the practice elements in competencies for each type of evaluation function, including competencies to research and teach evaluation as well as to undertake and manage it.

In one of her slides presenting the IDEA's approach to competencies, Linda Morra Imas makes the point: "You can't measure what matters most anyhow—the attitudes and disposition of the evaluator" (Morra Imas & Ba-Tall, 2009). Attitudes and disposition are essential for good evaluation. Even those for whom evaluation is largely a data process need some amount of these characteristics to recognize the story beneath the numbers. Several of the efforts described in this special issue point to these characteristics and clearly have some difficulty capturing them as competencies (e.g., professional identities for Aotearoa New Zealand, interpersonal and related skills for Canada and others, critical and analytical thinking in South Africa). If you sit in on hiring interviews, you witness more exploration of attitudes and disposition than technical competency—and technical and process competencies are the focus of many of the competency elements. The point is that although Morra Imas is correct in pointing to the challenges in "measuring" attitudes and disposition, what we need is to incorporate practice learning, and learn from practice what a competent evaluator looks like and, importantly, how we can

recognize and develop attitudes and dispositions essential to being a good contributor to evaluation.

Understandably, these initial competencies build on a base of evaluation that is historically formed and, I think, too narrow; they do not incorporate consideration of what future needs will look like. They address the question: *What do we need to be—to do what we do now—better?* Where evaluation has recently emerged and has been assigned a central role, such as in South Africa, this might be an acceptable starting point. My work in sustainable development and natural resource settings makes me keenly aware of the narrowness of evaluation undertakings and present capacities, and the Russian example usefully shows how evaluation—and so evaluation competencies—can start from a focus on different priorities. However, the dominant intellectual infrastructure for evaluation is in the broad health and human service categories (public health, education, social services, employment) and the more recent effort to develop and institutionalize development evaluation. Apart from development evaluation, these were the foundational issues that our current evaluation capacity was developed to address, and this is reflected in what is evaluated around the world and by the backgrounds of those who evaluate them. These are extremely important topics—and more and better evaluation of them is needed—but they leave large gaps; perhaps “gaping chasms” might be a better way of putting it.

It would be a useful exercise to overlay the current coverage of evaluation on a map of investments and expenditures by national, subnational, and multinational governments; private donors and charities; community organizations; and communities themselves. I expect that current evaluation only covers a portion of these current investments. And, frankly, I would have thought something like this would have been a component of some of the competency efforts. Work on competencies is an opportunity to advance evaluation by looking to currently unmet and future needs and opportunities. I understand that this was too much for these initial efforts to take on, but our competence needs to expand so that evaluation can address already important issues such as sustainability for which the field is not currently prepared.

Many current evaluators come to evaluation through doing, in some evaluation role, undertaking, overseeing, commissioning, or being on the program or community side of evaluations. Others, especially in the US, come to evaluation through academic training. How we

come to evaluation and also what evaluation looks like varies widely. The stories from South Africa and Russia and the HIV AIDS story are examples of how evaluation initially gained a presence largely influenced by donor priorities and was then augmented by emerging domestic needs. It is similar to the longer US experience where evaluation was shaped by an early focus on education, health, and employment, but there a strong academic institutional infrastructure was developed for evaluation, unlike most other places.

It is instructive how the needs of some evaluation consumer interests, especially government, have shaped evaluation in Canada and South Africa, with the introduction of government-wide legislation or policy requiring evaluation, and in Russia, where government focus on regulatory impact assessment has established that as an important and possibly unique approach. These all illustrate how evaluation as an increasing global field is strongly local, and, of course, the Aotearoa New Zealand experience provides very strong evidence of how evaluation methods and values can and need to be refined to have relevance. Collectively and individually, these illustrate the importance of adapting if evaluation and evaluation credentials are to be regarded as salient, legitimate, and credible, that is, to have reasonable prospects for being useful and influential. The Aotearoa New Zealand incorporation of a bicultural nation and transcultural partnership is in itself impressive and worthy of replication in settings such as Canada with English, French, and First Nations. Hopefully, this will be a non-negotiable element as the competency schemes adapt.

It is ironic that one might, if evil-spirited, point to a disconnect between what evaluation says others should do and what we have done ourselves with competencies and certification. We tell others, "Develop some kind of logic or theory for your intervention, test it out, experiment and adapt, evaluate throughout, engage decision makers and key stakeholders in those evaluation-adaptation processes and use the evaluations to improve." The absence of program logics and of evaluations of large investments such as the Canadian and Japanese certification efforts should concern evaluators and does not show us to practice what we advocate for others. If evaluation does indeed respond to a higher calling or is indeed a metascience, we should do better in our improvement strategies and in how we plan to admit members to the fold. The efforts described in this special issue are important early steps in a necessary undertaking. Of course there are gaps that can be pointed to and improvements to be had.

But if we applied evaluation approaches more systematically to planning implementation of credentials such as through certification or professional development, we should be able to do better.

The articles in this special issue provide a valuable prompt to consider again the competence of those who are influential in evaluations—evaluators, commissioners, users, and, hopefully, someday also evaluation researchers and teachers. This has provided a good start.

REFERENCE

- Morra Imas, L.M., & Ba-Tall, O. (2009). *Competencies and credentials for development evaluators: Update on an IDEAS initiative*. Retrieved from IDEAS: http://www.ideas-int.org/documents/file_list.cfm?DocsSubCatID=48

Andy Rowe has 30 years experience as an economist and evaluation consultant in North America, Europe, South Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and the Caribbean. His work focuses on evaluation in sustainable development, natural resource and dispute resolution settings. He has a PhD from the London School of Economics and is a 2013 Fellow and former President of the Canadian Evaluation Society.