

Thomas A. Schwandt. (2015). *Evaluation Foundations Revisited: Cultivating a Life of Mind for Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 215 pages. ISBN: 978-0804786553.

Reviewed by Douglas Dollinger

Thomas Schwandt's *Evaluation Foundations Revisited, Cultivating a Life of Mind for Practice* offers a thoughtful and richly detailed discussion of the foundations of evaluation practice. Because the different chapters of his book make their own independent and important contribution to the discussion, and are worth exploring in their own right, it is easy to miss the significance that each chapter has in relation to the principal thesis of the book, so we should start here. Understanding the thesis will help us see how the different chapters of the book fit together to form a continuous philosophical argument for a certain conception of evaluation.

The principal thesis of the book, articulated in the prologue, is that competent evaluation requires cultivating a life of the mind for practice. Two questions immediately suggest themselves. First, how does Schwandt conceive of this life of the mind for practice? Second, how does he propose that it be cultivated? Everything Schwandt has to say in the book touches on either one of these questions or both at once. Another question that occupies Schwandt concerns professionalization of the discipline: should evaluation become professionalized?

For Schwandt, cultivating a life of the mind for practice is about cultivating discretionary judgment, critical thinking, and reflection. The prologue fills this crucial picture in with the help of the great organizational theorist, Chris Argyris, whose concepts of double- and triple-loop learning are used to explicate this life of the mind for practice. The life of the mind focuses deliberately and reflectively, among other things, on developing the capacity for discretionary judgment. This is the type of judgment that helps the evaluator steer through the contextual uncertainties, ambiguities, indeterminacies, perplexities, subtleties, and limitations that evaluation always faces in practice—what another great organizational theorist, Donald Schön, calls “indeterminate zones of practice” (p. 10).

The different chapters of Schwandt's book spell out in detail just how indeterminate these zones of practice can be. The context of evaluation is too unruly, too indefinite, too rich in detail, too amorphous, and too inchoate to allow for the direct application of models and concepts. Practice, then, cannot be merely a domain of application. Another core element in the life of the mind for practice is the focus on what Schwandt calls the “thoughtful, perceptive and continual engagement” with current issues in evaluation theory and practice (p. 10). Ongoing

Corresponding author: Douglas Dollinger, independent practitioner, Ottawa; email: ddollinger01@gmail.com

debates among practitioners can, for instance, highlight the latest trends in thinking related to current methodologies, techniques, and approaches. The competent evaluator is shaped by, and within, a community of practice, it could be said.

Schwandt's thesis has some crucial implications. For one, evaluation should not become merely a technical exercise, an application of models, concepts, principles, and theories. Not everyone would agree with this, it should be noted. Individuals of a positivist bent will insist that evaluation risks sacrificing its integrity if it deviates from applying concepts and principles. Those who seek to reduce evaluation to plug-and-play applications of indicators and measures—think of the harried organizational manager—would also reject this conception, often, ironically enough, on the ground that it is not practical.

Another implication of Schwandt's thesis is that the traditional distinction between theory and practice does not hold in the domain of evaluation, a matter he takes up in Chapter 2, "Evaluation Theory and Practice." Theorizing and practising are different activities, but this does not imply that practice cannot itself be a field of learning and knowledge. For Schwandt, much of the more important learning that distinguishes competent evaluation is learning based on reflective practice. Practice, then, is a legitimate and, indeed, vital source of learning, often called practical wisdom.

Schwandt is concerned, rightly, I think, that evaluation will become the province of technicians. In Chapter 5, entitled "Politics and Policymaking," Schwandt illustrates the point in reference to the new public management, a philosophy of management dominant in the field of public administration over the past 30 years. Bureaucratic organizations tend to reduce evaluation to a jumble of benchmarking and audit exercises, dashboard and checklist assessments, and performance measurements of many different kinds. Evaluation thus loses its strategic and critical thrust, in the end becoming little more than an organ for monitoring performance. As Schwandt puts it, assurance in this case replaces critical valuation. Reduced to a technical discipline, evaluation becomes little more than a technology of control. This is something, incidentally, that I have witnessed countless times in my own professional practice. The danger is real.

On a related point, Schwandt is also concerned about what professionalizing evaluation could mean to the discipline, the substance of his final chapter, "Professionalism and Professionalization" (Chapter 7). While professionalization would anchor evaluation in a public purpose—advancing the public good, say, as the paramount obligation of practitioners, much in the way engineering professions do—there is also the risk that professionalizing the discipline will mean forcing the prodigious variability of evaluative approaches, not to mention the deeper questions about the nature and role of evidence and the use of evaluations, into a shallow repository of approved techniques and methods. Moreover, the vexed question remains about how one can go about professionalizing the discipline given that there is no consensus even on the purpose, nature, and use of evaluation, never mind debates over appropriate theories, methods, techniques, and

evidence. The significance of variability is taken up in Chapter 1, and the complex issues of evidence and use are discussed in Chapters 4 and 6 respectively.

In my view, one of the most important things Schwandt has to say about evaluation is that evaluation is a “judgment-oriented practice” (p. 47). He takes this topic up at some length in Chapter 3, “Values and Valuing.” Schwandt brings up Immanuel Kant in his discussion, so perhaps I may be allowed similar license, if only briefly. Kant says there is no rule for our faculty of judgment. Why? Because reflective judgment is the faculty of applying rules. Any rule for judgment would have to be a rule applied by judgment. Schwandt puts the point differently: “Thus, there are no decision rules to guide the systematic and responsive determination of appropriate criteria to be used in all evaluations (p. 49).” Contrast this for a moment with deductive reasoning: the step from premises to conclusion always involves the appeal to a rule of inference. In the logic of evaluation, however, there is no such rule. If evaluation rests on a capacity for judgment in this sense, then the key question becomes: how do we refine the capacity for such judgment? It is by reflecting on the contextuality of practice in light of the concepts, theories, models, observations, hypotheses, and other instruments of learning. Schwandt discusses the logic of evaluative judgments in Chapter 4, “Reasoning, Evidence, and Argument,” a fascinating chapter dealing with the multiple complexities that bedevil evaluative judgments.

The development of judgment, then, comes only when doing and thinking are combined in reflective practice, where reflective practice is cashed out in terms of Argyris’ double- and triple-loop learning. Even when evidence is in good order and analytical methods are sound, the evaluative synthesis that organizes and expresses the judgment of value always involves a *salto mortale*. The evaluator must step beyond the inherent uncertainties of evidence, method, and theory and offer up an intelligible, relevant, logically structured, and persuasively reasoned judgment of value, and he or she must do this, it should be noted again, without a higher rule warranting the inference. This is not a leap in the dark, but it is a leap; because it is a leap, moreover, evaluation will always represent what Schwandt calls a “contested space” (p. 145).

In the end, the value of an evaluative judgment will depend on the practical wisdom of the experienced evaluator. So, again, how should we go about educating evaluators? In his epilogue, Schwandt discusses the universities as possible sources of such education, but he identifies two problems standing in the way: first, universities are typically divided into departmental silos, whereas evaluation is by its nature multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary; second, universities, driven mainly by financial pressures, are increasingly becoming vocational centres, which leads to a narrowing of the educational enterprise. Schwandt leaves open the question about the role of universities in evaluation education. It is not clear to him whether universities are capable of providing such education, although they would appear to be natural choices.

This review has attempted to get at the core of Schwandt’s argument, which is not an easy task owing to the complexity and depth of the topics with which the

book deals from one chapter to the next. Schwandt's book lends valuable support to those of us who lose sleep over the fear that evaluation will become squeezed into a set of standard techniques and rules. Learning at the coal face, after all, is not only part of the fun, it is a crucial part of any good evaluation. My own sense is that the dangers Schwandt points to—the commodification of evaluation, for instance—are real dangers to the practice of evaluation. Indeed, because of these dangers, I would suggest in closing that Schwandt's book would provide a rich backdrop to the kind of dialogue that practitioners should now be engaging about the future of evaluation.