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On a Personal Note

Practical Pedagogical Activities to Foster the Development of “Reflective Practitioners”

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Abstract: The necessities and benefits of reflexivity are now well laid out in the broader social science literature, and the American Evaluation Association’s (2004) *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* identify reflective practices that evaluators are expected to carry out. This article uses the context of the university classroom and a writing sample to demonstrate how disciplined self-reflection can help students examine personal perspectives that surface during the research process and monitor bias. Failure to develop and maintain a reflective stance can result in a variety of ethical and practical dilemmas. Fortunately, written reflections and classroom discussions can help screen for potential dilemmas and point the evaluation in more appropriate directions.

Authors’ Note: No weight is intended in the appearance of the authors’ names. Jennifer Jewiss and K. Clark/Keefe should be considered equal first authors.

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A preliminary list of readings and classroom activities is included to help faculty guide students in their exploration, monitoring, and constructive use of personal perspectives.

Keywords: *reflexivity; subjectivity; teaching evaluation; reflective methods in evaluation; qualitative research*

Reflective practice takes the form of a reflective conversation with the situation.

Schön, 1983, p. 295

Teachers of evaluation, while undoubtedly taking a variety of approaches, introduce students to the broad field of evaluation and to various strategies associated with its practice. Curricula and instructional objectives are designed to help learners explore a range of questions, including the following: What is evaluation? What is its history, its relationship to other research traditions, its purpose? What decisions will be faced in the evaluation planning process? What research techniques will be most effective and feasible? What data analysis procedures are most appropriate? What is the best way to convey the findings about the particular program, organization, or phenomenon being evaluated?

A less explicit yet highly valuable objective in teaching evaluation is guiding students in their exploration of subjectivity and the use of reflective processes. Involving students in critical self-reflection is important for any kind of inquiry. As Alan Peshkin (1988) argued in his seminal article "In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own," "researchers, notwithstanding their use of quantitative or qualitative methods, their research problem, or their reputation for personal integrity, should systematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of their research" (p. 17). The inherently politicized, social, and value-oriented nature of evaluation (Greene, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kirkhart, 1995), as well as the increasing use of mixed methods and constructivist-oriented designs (Fetterman, 1994; Greene, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1981, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1997, 2002; Stake, 1975), makes attending to the intersections of the researcher and the researched all the more important. If the field of evaluation is to benefit fully from the merits of incorporating a constructivist perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and more pluralist set of practices, teachers of evaluation need to incorporate pedagogical strategies that introduce reflexivity as an essential practice for evaluators.

Providing far-reaching support for the ideas raised in this article, the American Evaluation Association's (AEA, 2004) *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* explicitly identifies reflective practices that professional evaluators are expected to carry out, including demonstrating cultural competence by

seeking awareness of their own culturally-based assumptions, [and] their understanding of the worldviews of culturally-different participants and stakeholders in the evaluation. . . . Diversity may be in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomics, or other factors pertinent to the evaluation context. (The Principles section, B. Competence, 2)

A latter statement emphasizes evaluators' "responsibility to understand and respect differences" (The Principles section, D. Respect for People, 6) and adds several other considerations, including culture, disability, age, and sexual orientation. Evaluators are advised of their duty "to account for potential implications of these differences when planning, conducting, analyzing, and reporting evaluations" (The Principles section, D. Respect for People, 6). Thus, awareness of one's own assumptions and attentiveness to the ways in which one's own perspectives influence various aspects of evaluation practice is critical to upholding AEA's (2004) *Guiding Principles* and, by extension, to the "continuing development of the profession of evaluation" (Preface section, D).

Detailed discussions about the nature of reflexivity and explanations of its specific relevance to the practice of social scientific research abound and are historically situated.¹ Given our interest here in privileging discussion of the practical over the conceptual, we turn to the following user-friendly definition for *reflexivity* in Thomas Schwandt's (2001) *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*: "The term reflexivity is . . . used in a methodological sense to refer to the process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical dispositions, preferences, and so forth" (p. 224). Impressing on readers the fundamental need to develop and maintain a reflective stance throughout the research process, Schwandt goes on to say that

reflexivity . . . can also signal more than inspection of potential sources of bias and their control. It can point to the fact [that] the inquirer is part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand. Hence, reflexivity can be a means for critically inspecting the entire research process, including reflecting on the ways in which a field-worker establishes a social network of informants and participants in a study and examining one's personal and theoretical commitments to determine how they serve as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways vis-à-vis respondents and participants, and for developing particular interpretations. Reflexivity understood in this way is held to be a very important procedure for establishing the *validity* of accounts of social phenomenon. (p. 224)

In this article, we use the context of the university classroom and an example of a field-based assignment to direct attention to the role that reflexivity has in teaching, learning, and practicing evaluation. Our goal is to highlight the importance of educating truly reflective practitioners² (Schön, 1983, 1987) and to offer practical strategies for guiding students of evaluation in their reflections about who they are, what they believe, and how their history and perspectives relate to their roles as researchers. As such, this discussion is inspired and informed by Karen Kirkhart's (1995) call—in her Presidential Address to the 1994 annual conference of the AEA—to enhance interpersonal validity: "the soundness or trustworthiness of understandings emanating from personal interactions" (p. 4). Although this article focuses on formal educational settings, we share Kirkhart's (1995) desire to enhance interpersonal validity across the broad spectrum of evaluation practice and hope that readers situated in other settings will consider how they might incorporate some of the proposed concepts and strategies into their work.

Enhancing the Professional Through Exploration of the Personal

A real, live person makes observations, takes field notes, asks interview questions, and interprets responses. Self-awareness, then, can be an asset in both fieldwork and analysis.

Patton, 2002, p. 64

Almost two decades have passed since Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1989) defined for the burgeoning profession of evaluation "an emergent but mature approach to evaluation that moves beyond mere science—just getting the facts—to include the myriad human, political, social, cultural, and contextual elements that are involved" (p. 8). Titrating their text *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, the authors effectively signal readers of their intention to cut a swath through the thicket of existing positivist-oriented generations of evaluation forms characterized by objective measurement and "value-free" judgment. Their goal was to provide a theoretical and philosophic basis for adopting a constructivist view and coinciding set of properties and practices of evaluation.

Turning-point texts such as Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) and Michael Patton’s (1978, 1986) early editions of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* advanced a constructivist movement in evaluation, providing the field with an important set of historical markers and a conceptual home for detailed consideration of reflexivity and its role in evaluation. Key figures in the field of evaluation deepened the earlier work of constructivists, further explicating interpretive approaches within the overall landscape of social program evaluation (Greene, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1997, 2002; Stake, 2004). For example, Jennifer Greene (2000) notes that during the past three decades, many evaluators have shifted to using a broader range of methods, incorporating the use of interpretive approaches that emphasize contextually sensitive designs and applications. Evaluators working within a constructivist framework, one that defines reality as locally created and situationally informed, began implementing “utilization-focused” approaches and incorporating qualitative methods more fully (Patton, 1997). Others concerned about shared control in the evaluation process and about the legitimacy of representations began placing program participant “voice” at the center of evaluation practices (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Stake, 1975). As the implications for abandoning claims of a researcher’s objectivist stance became more transparent, perspectives and methods that acknowledged subjectivity as well as intersubjectivity burgeoned (Kushner, 2000).

Constructivism has indeed helped signal evaluators’ responsibility for looking out: for attending to and privileging program participants’ expressions as the lens through which to learn about, change, and represent programs. Just as important, constructivism conveys evaluators’ responsibilities for looking in: for working to develop and maintain a critically self-reflective stance to examine personal perspectives and to monitor bias.³ Viewed in this way, looking in or being reflexive is not a self-indulgent exercise or one aimed only at political correctness. Nor is it an optional step to be considered as a possible “add-on” activity. Instead, learning about and practicing reflexivity is a fundamental and necessary component of being a responsive and responsible evaluator—one who demonstrates cultural competence and respect for the various forms of diversity that surface in relation to social programs (AEA, 2004).

Discussions about reflexivity that appear in the literature on qualitative methods have particular relevance and utility for encouraging reflective practice in the evaluation classroom. Texts designed to introduce students to the general field of qualitative inquiry emphasize that once one’s personal perspectives (generally referred to as subjectivity) are recognized, they can be monitored and explored to produce more trustworthy⁴ research (Glesne, 2006, p. 105). As Corrine Glesne (2006), author of the popular introductory text *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, notes, “a reflective section on who you are as a researcher and the lenses through which you view your work is now an expected part of qualitative research studies” (p. 109). Although we are not suggesting that the field of evaluation adopt this reporting standard, we do consider it essential that reflexivity be introduced to students of evaluation and that the practice of reflection accompany the teaching of evaluation methods. Doing so would not only advance the cause of cultural competence and respect for diversity (as discussed earlier) but would also position emerging evaluators to better address other aspects of AEA’s (2004) *Guiding Principles*, such as adhering “to the highest technical standards” (The Principles section, A. Systematic Inquiry, 1) when using field-based methods, discussing the values and assumptions “significantly affecting the interpretation of the evaluative findings” (The Principles section, A. Systematic Inquiry, 3), and being “explicit about their own . . . interests and values concerning the conduct and outcomes of the evaluation” (The Principles section, C. Honesty/Integrity, 4).

Putting Reflexivity Into Practice When Teaching Evaluation

When a practitioner does not reflect on his own inquiry, he keeps his own intuitive understandings tacit. . . .

Schön, 1983, p. 282

As teachers and evaluators, our experiences in both the classroom and the field have convinced us of the importance of incorporating coursework activities that help learners reflect on their own inquiry. Students of evaluation benefit from activities designed to explore a range of reflective questions, including the following:

- What bearing does the personal dimension have on why and how we do evaluation?
- In what ways do the evaluation foci intersect with the researcher's own life experiences?
- What roles do one's emotions, experiences, and perspectives play in the work of evaluation?

Failure to adequately reflect on these sorts of questions can result in a variety of ethical and practical dilemmas. As Glesne (2006) indicates, "awareness of your subjectivities can guide you to strategies to monitor those perspectives that might, as you analyze and write up your data, shape, skew, distort, construe, and misconstrue what you make of what you see and hear" (p. 123). Left unchecked, evaluators may inadvertently steer the project into the path of their own personal issues and bias, delimiting attention to a range of possible data sources, making less than could be made of important phenomena, and overemphasizing or glorifying aspects of programs or certain participants' perspectives. Kushner (2000) generously shares several examples of how his own unaddressed fears regarding unemployment and death interfered with data collection and analysis, including the following: "My reluctance to face my own realities certainly prevented me from asking certain questions . . . and there were significant aspects of the psychology of unemployment which were simply and inexcusably lost" (p. 86). In Schön's (1983) broader work on practitioner behavior, he goes so far as to describe unreflective practitioners as "limited" and potentially "destructive" (p. 290).

Davidson's (2005) text *Evaluation Methodology Basics: The Nuts and Bolts of Sound Evaluation* echoes the perspective of the authors above as well as those woven through AEA's (2004) *Guiding Principles* with a strongly worded caution:

In evaluation in particular, there is a grave danger that the application of inappropriate personal or cultural preferences or biases may lead to faulty conclusions and, therefore, misguided decisions. As evaluators, we need to be open to this possibility. If inappropriate values have crept in, we need to track them down and weed them out. Conversely, if important and relevant values (e.g., those that are relevant to the cultural context) have been excluded, we need to identify them and bring them to bear in the evaluation. If we are unfamiliar with the context to the extent that it would limit our ability to clearly identify or understand those values, it is our responsibility to bring onto the evaluation team people who can help us with that. (p. 90)

Fortunately, the university classroom offers a forum for helping students of evaluation to identify the sorts of personal and cultural perspectives that run the risk of steering evaluation projects in inappropriate directions. Perhaps most important, classroom discussions and activities can demonstrate the merits of reflection and signal the necessity to practice reflection throughout one's career as an evaluator.

What follows is a vignette that illustrates a doctoral student's experience of the personal powerfully intersecting with the professional.⁵ The vignette is based on a site visit to the office

of an educational administrator who served as a key informant for a process evaluation (Patton, 1997; Weiss, 1998) of two community partnerships in Vermont. The study was designed to acquire information about "the internal dynamics and actual operations" (Patton, 1997, p. 206) of the partnerships and to gather the stories behind the quantitative data in communities with improving education and social service outcomes.

The vignette (presented with permission from the student, who wishes to remain anonymous) resulted from an assignment in which graduate students were asked to reflect on interview and observational data gathered during a pilot study and to incorporate their reflections into a written account.⁶ The vignette is written in a layered fashion, with the researcher's observations and reflections appearing in regular type and edited excerpts from the interviewee's comments (drawn from the transcript and field notes) appearing in italics. This in-depth example demonstrates how disciplined self-reflection can inform our work as evaluators, deepening self-awareness and ownership of the evaluator's personal perspectives that surface during the research process.

As soon as I came through the door to the student services center where David⁷ works, I could hear him on the phone back in his office. On the first chair inside the front door, I set down my shoulder bag loaded with notebook, recorder, tapes, and all the paperwork—consent forms, project summary, interview questions. This was my second interview of the 40 or so I'd be doing in two Vermont communities. For a new graduate research fellow, I was as ready as I was going to be. In my head, I was talking myself through every step.

Now remember. Don't leave without asking him for names of others to talk to—parents, volunteers, business people to round out the mix. Really, all the contacts we have so far are people who work in education and human services. Now, I wonder if we'll do the interview in this front room or—

Alright. Yup. Yup. See you then. Bye.

With the clunk of the receiver, his phone call was over.

Hi. How ya' doin'. Come on back.

I headed down the hall, and the interview started as soon as I reached his door. An avalanche of thoughts had clearly been building since I had called him to set up the interview appointment. The usual introductory formalities got run over in the rush. We talked our way back out into the front room where I had entered. Gesturing and interjecting the odd phrase, I negotiated the set-up of my things. Consent form signed. Good. Yup, there's an electrical outlet right over there. Thanks. Before too many of his words tumbled out irretrievably, I wrestled my notebook and tape recorder into position. The student services center was empty at this time of day, and the momentum of his thinking carried us through a 2-hour expanse during this first visit, and another 2 hours the following week.

As part of the orientation, you get a bus, and you fill the bus with all these new teachers—do a tour for them of this catchment area. So let's say we start at the local high school and we show them where these kids come from. Because if you're a new teacher who comes up here from Putnam County, you're literally just coming up the interstate, making a right hand turn to the high school or a left hand turn to go to the elementary school—and that's your experience of Watertown.

So what you do is you come down this way and you'll take the left onto Main Street, and you see these palatial old houses that used to be a railroad tycoon's because there used to be a railroad. These were the homes of the railroad tycoons, so people will see them and think, "Wow, Watertown is a very, very wealthy community." So what we do is literally a tour—we

loop up through Salem and East Fairview—show them that for some kids they're on the bus for an hour and a half before they actually get to school.

What I'm also trying to do is show these new teachers, not just the rural feature, but the poverty that does exist in this area. And one of the things that particularly sticks for folks is if I take them down toward what's called Route 9, which was—before the interstate was built—the only way from Easton to the Watertown area. What you'll see on the left-hand side, if you're going south, is something called High Country Estates, where homes begin at \$350,000. So they run anywhere from \$400,000 to \$700,000. On the right-hand side is what they call the Meadowside Trailer Park, which has been condemned by the state. So what you see is exactly the contrast that we're dealing with in terms of the socioeconomic disparities of youngsters who come to school.

That's where it's very, very hard when we start talking about Watertown. You're dealing with an area where there are communities within a community so to speak—and you need to understand that. We've certainly got the Native American community, we've got a low-income community, we've got a dairy farming community, we've got the upper middle-class community, which takes on a life of its own in terms of the middle-class group that is moving into Watertown. These are all communities that make up this umbrella we call Watertown and the surrounding areas.

Through the window, he sees my car parked out front. Across the table, he sees the ring on my finger. Nicely dressed—I'm just trying to look professional. After all, that's what is expected of me when I leave my office at the university. But next time, I'm wearing jeans. Yup, upper middle-class. I wonder if he's actually put me in one of those \$400,000 houses. Little does he know though that I've lived on both sides of that street. Little does he know that being the fourth out of five kids in my family, I was the first not to live in the trailer park. And the house I grew up in—maybe not the house necessarily, but the way we sometimes lived—just might have been condemned by the folks at the state health department. Just cut off the mold and eat it. Jar of jelly drops and breaks on the cellar stairs. Scrape it up and save it. Spit out the glass later, in the school lunchroom, and hope nobody sees.

This interview isn't about me—I scold the piece of my mind floating off beyond his voice, which is winding the tape forward. Trying to pull myself back from 21 Pine Drive, Middletown, Pennsylvania, to right here in Watertown, Vermont. Yet isn't it to some degree? Isn't this tour through poverty being told for my benefit? After all, like those new teachers, I now live in Putnam County. To get here, I drove up the highway in my comfortable car and took a left off the interstate. That's been my experience of Watertown.

David is our insider in this community, our key informant. With a doctorate in education, he's steeped in the same academic mindset as me. He's done studies and been studied. He knows well, knows fondly, the lead researcher I'm working for. She sent me to him. So he knows then that I'm OK, or I wouldn't be here. In a friendly way, in a generous way, he's telling me what I need to know. He knows that his job is to get me situated in the realities of this community. And little does he know just what a good job he's doing. Kids and families aching their way through poverty. The raw contrast between the haves and the havenots. I feel the chafing of decades-old wounds I think have long since healed.

With the Meadowside Trailer Park and High Country Estates right across the street from each other, how hard could it be when I was given a lucky break—yeah, how hard was it—to just move to the other side? But I did my time over there. In conversations like these, I'm stuck in the middle of the road, caught in the headlights, viscerally frantic, not sure which side to run to. Not sure which way is home. Not sure where I'd feel more comfortable.

All fall, we'd crunched the numbers on these communities. Percentage of child poverty. Alcohol and drug use. Abuse. Violence. I'd forgotten—no, I just hadn't made the connection. Silly, isn't it, how much easier it is to recognize some other family in those statistics?

When we talk about parental involvement, we need to know "who are we talking about?" Are we talking about low-income parents who might have dropped out of that very school and who literally experience anxiety attacks when they walk in there—and sweaty palms and dry mouth because they remember their experiences at that school?

OK, I'm safely out of the headlights now. Succeeding in school was the least of our worries. There, Mom could always be confident. In the classroom, we could always be confident—well, sweaty palms until you were sure that you'd gotten the A. The headlights move on down the road and shine on some other family now. I'm all the more sensitive to their wounds though, mine freshly reopened. I shift in my seat and listen to the rawness of other families' worries. I hear about the shards of glass they spit out, wishing nobody had to see.

Back From the Field

. . . reflexivity means that you are as concerned with the research process as you are with the data you are collecting.

Glesne, 2006, p. 125

This graduate student credited the reflective writing exercise with deepening her awareness of some of the personal perspectives on poverty and education that she brought into the research context. In a sense, the exercise enabled her to give voice to her own story and experiences that surfaced during the process of gathering qualitative data. It gave her an audience (the professor and fellow students) for complex thoughts and feelings—a parallel of sorts to the audience she had offered to her interviewees. Some students, like the one who shared the previous example, note that their written reflections provide a safe, focused place to set down their own perspectives, better equipping them to monitor identified sources of potential bias. Their written reflections generate essential information that is used to help distinguish their subjectivity from the intended subject matter of the study. In addition, as Glesne (2006) points out, there are value-added dimensions to becoming and remaining aware of the intersections between the researcher and the researched: "When you monitor your subjectivity, you increase your awareness of the ways it might distort, but you also . . . learn more about your own values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, and needs" (p. 123).

The reflective writing process, featured in the previous example, enabled the student researcher to identify ways in which her personal experiences with poverty deepened her understanding of the context at hand. At the same time, the writing process helped the student to see the ways in which her family's interactions with education differed from many of those described by the interviewee, and thus, she was better positioned to monitor relevant assumptions that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. In the end, she didn't resort to wearing blue jeans during subsequent site visits, which had been her initial, knee-jerk thought regarding how to stave off potential perceptions that she might not be adequately aware of the socioeconomic realities of the community. However, her reflections on that early encounter better prepared her to signal her understanding to participants through tone of voice, utterances, facial expressions, and body language. The learning that resulted from the reflective writing activity helped this student identify subtle but powerful ways of acknowledging her understanding of the hardships of poverty, an issue of utmost importance for most of those involved in the program. In-depth reflection helped disentangle this central concern from all the other methodological and logistical concerns running through the mind of a novice evaluator, enabling her to find experientially informed and professionally appropriate ways to negotiate her interactions with program stakeholders during subsequent site visits and interviews. Thus,

perceived divides between researcher and “researched” were better bridged through the added dimension that reflexivity offered, and potentially problematic misperceptions regarding this key area of cultural competence were averted.

Decisions about whether and how to traverse the personal when working with students in evaluation courses center around the perspectives held by the instructor, the nature of the evaluation projects at hand, the life experiences of the students, and much more. Our belief is that time should be set aside to explicitly discuss subjectivity and reflexivity, particularly when doing fieldwork, conducting interviews, and using other “close-range” techniques (Breuer & Roth, 2003) in evaluation. This assertion aligns with current recommendations for building cultural sophistication through processes that enable evaluators “to know themselves—their roots, histories, biases, prejudices, and assumptions about race, culture, and ethnicity” (Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2005, p. 53). Disciplined self-reflection that is considered an essential practice when using interpretive methods supports the sort of awareness that is needed to enhance evaluators’ cultural sophistication. In our experience as instructors, exploring the role of subjectivity is the most powerful way of engaging students in self-reflection, with the benefits of such explorations often extending well beyond the appropriate use of qualitative methods to fostering truly reflective practitioners, regardless of methodological leanings or the data collection requirements of a given project.

Instructors who are attuned to the important role that the personal plays in the evaluation process can effectively supplement standard texts and training materials with various activities that help their students explore, monitor, and even constructively use the personal. For example, some faculty introduce pertinent readings from qualitative texts, offer relevant anecdotes from their own experiences as evaluators, and prompt students to reflect on the personal and cultural dimensions with comments in the margins of class papers or questions raised in class discussions.

This article closes with three activities designed to explicitly guide students in their exploration, monitoring, and use of the personal as they embark on the process of developing an evaluation plan, prepare to interact with stakeholders, and consider their early observations and learnings from initial forays into the program site.⁸ A list of recommended readings for instructors and/or students is also provided, emphasizing those that we have found to be most helpful in our work with students. Our intent is not to provide an extensive list of the relevant literature but rather to highlight selected readings that we find to be most accessible for students and for instructors who are entering into new territory in their teaching. Because of the time constraints experienced in many educational settings, our operating philosophy here is that “less is more” given the practical realities of accommodating additional readings and activities into course syllabi.

Activity 1. Writing Assignment: Considering One’s Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs When Embarking on the Process of Planning an Evaluation

Background

Some evaluation courses require students to develop an evaluation plan for a real-world program of their choosing. While students are in the process of selecting a program for which they will prepare an evaluation plan, ask them to identify a few “candidate programs” for consideration. The process of considering several potential programs not only assists with finding an appropriate match but also provides a broader view of the sorts of personal and cultural

issues that surface in relation to various programmatic contexts. The juxtaposition of several candidate programs often illuminates personal and cultural dynamics that might go unnoticed were each student to focus on a single program from the outset.

Instructions

To select a program for which you will prepare an evaluation plan, please identify a few "candidate programs" for consideration. For each candidate program, write a brief description of the program (as you currently understand it). In addition, discuss the sorts of personal and cultural issues that might surface were you to actually conduct an evaluation of each program. Consider your current feelings about the program, your relationships (or lack of familiarity) with program staff or participants, and how "your own values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, and needs" (Glesne, 2006, p. 123) might align with or differ from those represented by the program. Consult the AEA's (2004) *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* for principles that "should proactively guide the behaviors of professionals in everyday practice" (Preface section, C). For each candidate program, discuss the particular considerations that might arise were you to serve as an evaluator.

Activity 2. Classroom Exercise: Using Your Emotions to Identify Subjectivities When Preparing to Interact With Stakeholders

Background

Teaching strategies intended to emphasize reflexivity need to guide students in recognizing when their subjectivities are engaged. With most Western classrooms still heavily influenced by Cartesian notions of a mind-body split—intellect being aligned with mind and emotion with body—asking students to think from a place of emotion can strike many students (and instructors) as awkward and antithetical to learning. Yet, as Glesne (2006) indicates, "your emotions help you to identify when your subjectivity is being engaged. Instead of trying to suppress your feelings . . . use them to inquire into your perspectives and interpretations and to shape new questions through re-examining your assumptions" (p. 105).

Instructions

For students, and seasoned evaluators alike, emotions often surface when one is preparing to engage stakeholders in evaluation planning processes. Take 5 minutes to reflect on the emotions that have surfaced for you as you prepare to interact with stakeholders in the evaluation planning process. On a piece of paper, jot down the emotions that come to mind and any related thoughts. What do you sense are the values, concerns, and/or hopes that are spurring these emotions? This part of the exercise is intended to get your thoughts rolling. Next, I'll ask you to partner with a classmate and discuss what you would like to share from your reflections. Then, we'll reassemble as a full group and generate a list to provide a broader view of the emotions that are surfacing within the class and to consider the sorts of personal and cultural perspectives that often need to be monitored during the research process. To close the activity, we'll look to course readings and AEA's (2004) *Guiding Principles* for suggestions as to how one might address areas of concern.

Activity 3. Writing Assignment: Writing to Reflect on an Early Site Visit and/or Interaction With a Program Stakeholder

Background

Examples of reflective writing (such as the layered account included in this article) help introduce students to the notion that writing can serve as a powerful mechanism for reflecting on their experiences with program staff, participants, and other stakeholders. When students read this sort of reflective writing (or hear it read aloud), it tends to prompt their own reflections and gives them permission to consider a wider array of thoughts and feelings than they may have explored in academic settings previously. To prepare students for the following activity, share the example from this article or another of your choosing.

Instructions

Select a single experience—such as an early site visit or a particular interaction with a program stakeholder(s)—to examine in greater detail. Draw on your notes and observations to write a description of the experience. In addition, reflect on the thoughts and feelings that surfaced for you during the site visit or while interacting with the program stakeholder(s). Consider the “personal characteristics or circumstances such as social class, gender, race/ethnicity, age, language, disability, or sexual orientation” (Kirkhart, 1995, p. 5) that seem to have influenced your thoughts and actions or those of the participants. Consider how your beliefs or values—such as “religious beliefs, personal or professional values, philosophical perspectives, and political convictions” (Kirkhart, 1995, p. 5)—may have shaped your thoughts and actions. Your description and reflections can be presented in a variety of forms that help invite readers into the personal and emotional dimensions of the fieldwork experience, such as a layered account, a script, or a journal format.

Preliminary List of Recommended Readings

- Abma, T. (1998). Text in an evaluative context: Writing for dialogue. *Evaluation, 4*(4), 434-454.
- Abma, T. (Ed.). (2000). *Telling tales: On evaluation and narrative* (Advancements in Program Evaluation Series, 6). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier.
- Davidson, J. (2005). *Evaluation methodology basics: The nuts and bolts of sound evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Chapter 6, “‘Values’ in Evaluation.”
- Finlay, L. (2002, April). “Outing” the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research, 12*(4), 531-545.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Chapter 5, “The Personal Dimension: Rapport and Subjectivity.”
- Greene, J. C. (1996). Qualitative evaluation and scientific citizenship: Reflections and refractions. *Evaluation, 2*(3), 277-289.
- Greene, J. C. (2000). Understanding social programs through evaluation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 981-999). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kirkhart, K. (1995). Seeking multicultural validity: A postcard from the road. *Evaluation Practice, 16*, 1-12.
- Kleinsasser, A. M. (2000, Summer). Researchers, reflexivity, and good data: Writing to unlearn. *Theory Into Practice, 39*(3), 155-162.

- Krieger, S. (1985). Beyond "subjectivity": The use of the self in social science. *Qualitative Sociology*, 8, 309-324.
- Kushner, S. (2000). *Personalizing evaluation*. London: Sage. Chapter 3, "Evaluation and a Philosophy of Individualism." Chapter 4, "Knowing Me, Knowing You: Evaluation Interviewing."
- Lather, P. (1992, Spring). Critical frames in educational research: Feminist and poststructural perspectives. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 87-99.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Chapter 2, "Strategic Themes in Qualitative Inquiry." Chapter 6, "Fieldwork Strategies and Observation Methods."
- Peshkin, A. (1988, October). In search of subjectivity—One's own. *Educational Researcher*, 17(7), 17-21.
- Pillow, W. (2003, March-April). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175-196.
- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 959-978). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, C. (2006). Narrating significant experience: Reflective accounts and the production of (self) knowledge. *British Journal of Social Work*, 36, 189-206.

Summary

With the necessities and benefits of reflexivity now well laid out in the broader social science literature and raised in certain evaluation texts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kushner, 2000; Patton, 1997, 2002), the time is ripe to explore practical strategies for teaching and modeling reflexivity in evaluation courses. Furthermore, the AEA's (2004) *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* explicitly identifies reflective practices that professional evaluators are expected to carry out, such as "seeking awareness of their own culturally-based assumptions [and] their understanding of the worldviews of culturally-different participants and stakeholders in the evaluation" (The Principles section, B. Competence, 2).

This article emphasizes the importance of educating reflective evaluation practitioners. An example of a field-based assignment from a graduate course is used to direct attention to the role that reflexivity has in teaching, learning, and practicing evaluation. The article also presents strategies for guiding students in their reflections about who they are, what they believe, and how their history and beliefs relate to their roles as evaluators. The suggested activities are designed to help students identify their own personal perspectives and prompt them to consult AEA's *Guiding Principles* and other relevant literature for suggestions on how to address areas of concern.

Although issues related to subjectivity and reflexivity are often linked to the important role they play in fostering the appropriate use of qualitative methods, the implications and benefits extend well beyond a particular methodology. Disciplined self-reflection deepens self-awareness and ownership of the evaluator's personal perspectives. When evaluators look inward to maintain a critically self-reflective stance, they are better positioned to explore their subjectivity, to monitor bias, and to employ values and behaviors that are important and relevant to the particular context. Thus, we argue that the concept of reflexivity be introduced and the practice of reflection be initiated prior to students' early interactions with program stakeholders.

Given the inherently politicized and value-based nature of evaluation, we believe that self-reflection on the part of evaluators is critical. Failure to develop and maintain a reflective stance can result in a variety of ethical and practical dilemmas. Fortunately, written reflections and classroom discussions can help screen for potential dilemmas and point the evaluation in

more appropriate directions. Pedagogical strategies that foster self-reflection as it relates to the researcher's role illuminate the merits of reflection, signaling its importance at the early stages of and throughout one's career as an evaluator. In short, we believe that learning about and practicing reflexivity is a fundamental and necessary component of becoming a responsive and responsible evaluator.

Notes

1. The postmodernist turn, with its attendant constructivist ontology and epistemology, called into question long-held assumptions about the "scientific" nature of research and evaluation, the authority of the researcher, and the ways reports were written (Delamont, 1992; Dickens & Fontana, 1994; Greene, 2000). Theorists and practitioners alike began to "emphasize the need for science to be self-reflexive about its limitations" (Usher, 1996, p. 25). For a detailed discussion of inquiry in the postmodern era, see especially Guba and Lincoln (2005).

2. Although Schön's research on practitioner behavior did not include practitioners of evaluation, his research and writing is intended to reflect issues of professional practice that extend beyond the specific types of practitioners studied.

3. Michael Quinn Patton's (2002) work *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* provides an excellent foundational inroad to these ideas and practices. In this work, he draws on the broad field of qualitative inquiry to talk specifically about the strategic theme of reflexivity and its practical implications for research and evaluation (see especially pp. 63-68). Kushner (2000) also delves into the highly personal aspects of evaluation practice and the important role of reflexivity.

4. The source of the term *trustworthiness*, especially as it pertains to quality evaluation, is from Lincoln and Guba's (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation* (see especially pp. 233-251). The authors contend that "establishing truth value involves asking the question, 'how can one establish confidence in the "truth" of the findings of a particular inquiry for the subjects [*sic*] with whom and the context in which the inquiry was carried out'" (p. 234). This criterion has as its parallel reliability, which is primarily used in experimental, quasi-experimental, or other quantitatively oriented research.

5. Portions of this paper were included in a presentation delivered by Jennifer Jewiss at the 2003 Annual Conference of the American Evaluation Association in Reno, Nevada entitled, *Creative Analytic Practices for Sorting out Self and Subject Matter: A Layered Account Analyzing a Pivotal Interview with One Key Informant*.

6. This particular example originated from a qualitative methods course. Given that the activity served as a powerful vehicle for exploring the researcher's subjectivity at the outset of an evaluation project in which she was engaged at the time, it prompted the design of a similar activity for use in evaluation courses (as discussed later in this article).

7. All individual and place names (with the exception of the state of Vermont) have been changed to protect the confidentiality of those involved.

8. Several additional activities for exploring multicultural and cross-cultural aspects of evaluation can be found in chapter 3 of Preskill and Russ-Eft's (2005) helpful resource *Building Evaluation Capacity: 72 Activities for Teaching and Training*.

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