



# **Dialogue in Evaluation**

## *A Relational Perspective*

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Dialogue in evaluation is presented as a fundamental value commitment to engagement, particularly engagement with the relational, moral and political dimensions of our contexts and our craft. Because it is at root a relational and communicative activity, effective dialogue in evaluation is inclusive of all legitimate stakeholder interests and involves interactions that are respectful, reciprocal and equitable. Effective dialogue, in turn, can enhance the democratizing potential of evaluation.

**KEYWORDS:** democratic force; engagement; inclusion; reform initiative elementary school; respect

### **Introduction**

Evaluation is a diverse field of professional practice. Our diversity is partially marked by our allegiances to different methodologies, which encompass different assumptions about social reality, social knowing, and what is important and possible to know, as well as different methods for gathering, analyzing and writing up data. Our diversity is also marked by differences in our location in society, or what purposes and whose interests we choose to address in our work. Chelimsky (1997), for example, offers three primary purposes: knowledge generation, development and accountability. House and Howe (1999) add democratization, while Mark et al. (2000) emphasize evaluation's contributions to social betterment. Our diverse ways of practicing evaluation are further – and increasingly visibly – marked by differences in our underlying value commitments (Greene, 1997; House, 1980). These commitments range from efficiency and utilitarianism to enlightenment and education to social justice and equity.

It is through the defining lens of value commitments, rather than methodology or purpose, that dialogue in evaluation is most meaningfully understood and discussed. For dialogue in evaluation most fundamentally means a value commitment to *engagement*, engagement with problems of practice, with the challenges of difference and diversity in practices and their understandings, and thus with the relational, moral and political dimensions of our contexts and our craft. Thinking about dialogue in evaluation thus signals attention (1) to who is participating and

who is not in evaluative communications, (2) to the 'social relations of inquiry' (Robinson, 1993), and (3) to the democratizing potential of evaluation communications. In the discussion that follows I will address each of these issues. I will first briefly articulate my perspective on the intersection of dialogue and evaluation in contemporary discourse, and I will conclude with some thoughts about envisioning evaluative dialogues in practice.

### **What is Dialogue in Evaluation?**

As is well illustrated by this special issue on dialogue and evaluation, theorists of various stripes are increasingly promoting the importance of dialogue in evaluation (Abma, 1998; Everitt, 1996; House and Howe, 1999, 2000; Karlsson, 1996; Rallis and Rossman, 2000; Ryan and DeStefano, 2000; Schwandt, 1997). In my understanding, dialogue in evaluation contexts refers to engaged, inclusive and respectful interactions among evaluation stakeholders about their respective stances and values, perspectives and experiences, dreams and hopes, and interpretations of gathered data related to the evaluand and its context. The purpose of such evaluative dialogue is to enable stakeholders to more deeply understand and respect, though not necessarily agree with, one another's perspectives. Such understandings, in turn, can engender more reciprocal, equitable and caring stakeholder relationships in that context, as embodied in an improved, transformed or even revolutionized evaluand. In these ways, dialogic evaluation constitutes an important democratic activity in society.

The substance of evaluative dialogues are the meanings and values held by different stakeholders about the evaluand and its context. An administrator of the program being evaluated may be keenly concerned about coverage – reaching as many potential service recipients as possible – while a program staff member, a service deliverer, may be most concerned about breadth of service – providing critically needed services to participants in the program. Program funders, relevant policy makers, program recipients, advocacy groups and others certainly bring different concerns and issues to the evaluation dialogue. The dialogue is then the forum for stakeholder sharing of these various program interests, meanings and values.

Dialogue is also fundamentally relational and communicative; it directly engages the moral-ethical and politicized power relationships among stakeholders. So, evaluation dialogues are also about stakeholder relationships – about power and voice, agency and moral purpose, caring and empathy, understanding and acceptance of difference. In dialogic evaluation, it is assumed that these relationships at least partly structure and define the program being evaluated, these relationships matter to program quality and effectiveness, and thus these relationships are at least partly the focus of evaluative engagement, reflection and learning.

Effective dialogue thus involves moral relationships of trust, respect, caring, openness to difference, and political relationships of commitment to equity of power and voice. Effective dialogue invokes communicative strengths like:

... tolerance, patience, and openness to give and receive criticism, the inclination to admit that one may be mistaken, the desire to reinterpret or translate one's own concerns,

. . . the self-imposition of restraint in order that others may have a turn to speak, and . . . the willingness to listen thoughtfully and attentively. (Burbules and Rice, 1991: 411)

With effective dialogue, stakeholder interactions governed by role and status differences and by protection of self-interests are replaced by interactions guided by reciprocity, appreciation for the worldviews and interests of Others, and a willingness to make space for Others' concerns and agendas.

Dialogue is also viewed as enabling a postmodern evaluation practice to embrace uncertainty and irreducible plurality and still make meaningful and important discernments of quality. That is, in our postmodern world, there are multiple legitimate perspectives on human experience and multiple defensible standards for making value judgments about our evaluands. In many contexts, this multiplicity risks relativism, so something is needed to help us not simply accept all interpretive accounts and judgments as equally sound. This 'something' cannot be a single set of principles or standards or even methods, for these are technical solutions to what is essentially a political and moral problem. Rather, this 'something' must directly engage the moral-political complexities, uncertainties and pluralities of our non-foundational, postmodern world. Dialogue, especially democratic dialogue, offers considerable promise in this vein.

If there are no privileged perspectives, no centers of truth, no absolute authorities in matters of taste and judgment, then all truths are working truths and relative truths. The full participation of those involved in decisions about what is going on and what should be done is the only way to define non-oppressive, culturally pertinent truths and working practical judgments. (Howe, 1994)

## **Advancing Dialogue in Evaluation**

Thinking of evaluation dialogically then invokes the socio-political dimensions of communication, rather than validity-focused epistemic contributions or service-focused utilitarian contributions of evaluative communications. My discussion below will concentrate on these socio-political dimensions, and will cast them in terms of their promise and potential. I fully recognize that many evaluation contexts will fall short of this ideal promise and potential (Greene, 2000). Even so, presenting the ideal gives us all a vision toward which to strive.

*Dialogue in evaluation is inclusive of all legitimate stakeholder perspectives, experiences and value claims.*

Dialogue directly invokes the key interests in an evaluation, as it provides a space for the sharing and reciprocal understanding of these interests and for the possible and initial development of some common ways of seeing and acting, some collective perspectives on meaning. The purpose of dialogue is precisely this sharing of views, this mutual learning and understanding, toward the legitimization of diverse interests and, long-term, their reconciliation. Reconciliation here does not imply consensus or even agreement on what constitutes evaluative quality and meaning. Rather it implies an acceptance or an accommodation of difference, a coming to terms with diversity. It therefore matters considerably that all legitimate interests in a given evaluation context are included in the conversation (House and Howe, 2000; Ryan et al., 1998).

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The concept of dialogue is one that legitimizes multiple forms of expertise and knowledge, including program participant experiential knowledge, practitioner program knowledge, and decision-maker policy knowledge, in addition to the empirical knowledge generated by the evaluator. In dialogic evaluation, evaluator or technical expertise is not privileged over others. Rather, the evaluator contributes the empirical, data-based claims generated in the evaluation to the broader conversation and thereby makes them available to all stakeholder participants for their review and discussion. The important dialogue then happens among stakeholder participants, as they review and critique the questions, data results, and inferences of the evaluation, each from his/her own perspective and value lens. Through this process of dialogue come mutual respect, enhanced understanding, and increased legitimization of difference. Through this process also come evaluative claims that embody these process dimensions of respect, understanding and difference. In dialogic evaluation, that is, multiple stakeholder interests must be included and respectful dialogue among those interests must be pursued in order to render meaningful evaluative claims about the evaluand. Inclusion becomes constitutive of warrant. Evaluative claims that exclude some interests or that have been developed and presented through a monologic versus dialogic process (Abma, 1998; Coulter, 1999) are neither complete nor warranted.

*Dialogue in evaluation is respectful and equitable. It involves everyone as speakers and listeners, as teachers and learners. It requires patience and tolerance, humility and genuine openness to the possibility of change in the situation, in others and especially in oneself.*

Communication in dialogic evaluation foregrounds the 'social relations in inquiry' (Robinson, 1993; Whitmore, 1991) or how we are in the world as inquirers (Schwandt, 1997). These social relations concern how we position ourselves in the inquiry context: as experts, scientists, facilitators, social activists. They concern how we view and interact with others in the inquiry context: as collaborators, informants, practitioners, citizens; and they concern the norms and values that guide such interactions: distance, neutrality, validity, disengagement, or equality, reciprocity, tolerance, willingness to listen and understand, and engagement (Schwandt, forthcoming).

In dialogic evaluation, our position is one of engagement with the problems of practice of that evaluative context. We strive to promote understanding of these problems of practice and to facilitate stakeholder dialogue about them. We insist that such dialogue be inclusive *and* be guided by norms of equality, reciprocity, tolerance, willingness to listen, and openness to understanding. We strive for effective and meaningful dialogue via moral relationships of trust and caring, and political relationships of equity and fairness. Moreover, just as inclusive communication is constitutive of warranted evaluation claims, so are respectful, equitable and authentic social relations similarly constitutive of meaningful, defensible evaluation practice. In many important respects, genuine dialogue *is* meaningful evaluation.

*When dialogue in evaluation is inclusive and is respectful of difference and equitable of voice, then evaluation can importantly serve democratizing aims and ambitions.*

Furthermore, dialogic evaluation occupies a location in society that also fundamentally engages the politics of voice, equity, and power, and thus is embedded in society's democratic activities. That is, dialogic evaluation is about not just interpersonal but also political equity of voice, understanding and acceptance of difference, and re-distribution of resources. The essence of dialogue in evaluation is the reciprocal exchange and education among stakeholders about their diverse interests and values, toward legitimizing difference and equalizing voice. Dialogic evaluation then serves as a forum and force for democratization.

Through the lens of dialogic evaluation – and its attendant insistence on inclusive and respectful communication – the locations for evaluation in society that become the most salient highlight the socio-political and value dimensions of evaluation, notably, whose interests are being served and what values are being promoted through evaluative practice. For the essence of dialogue in evaluation is the reciprocal exchange and education among stakeholders about their diverse interests and values, toward legitimizing difference and equalizing voice. These locations for evaluation in society thus foreground the democratizing potential of evaluation, the ways in which evaluation can serve democratizing aims – within the specific evaluation context and, more ambitiously, beyond it. As stated persuasively by Angela Everitt (1996: 186):

Evaluation may be usefully thought of as 'accounts of interpretive justification' [from Fraser] rather than as a measurement of performance against pre-determined indicators. . . . [And better accounts are] those reached by means of communicative processes that most closely approximate ideals of democracy, equality and fairness [and] those that do not disadvantage some groups of people vis-à-vis others.

## **Practicing Dialogic Evaluation**

I currently have the opportunity to work with many of these ideas and ideals in an evaluation of a reform initiative in an elementary school. This initiative is complex and ambitious, composed of interwoven strands. It is political as the school serves mostly African-American children, the school's low achievement rates have claimed it a position on the state's 'watch list', and the district of this school is embroiled in civil rights lawsuits. Also it potentially matters, as education remains the most important pathway to future long-term success in our society.

There are already many regular gatherings of people involved in this school related to the challenges of school improvement and reform. The reform process itself follows a model that prescribes such gatherings, including those of a leadership team, an advisory team, and curriculum-design teams. The school has many community-based projects within its walls, primarily for after-school and enrichment activities. These people also have gatherings, as do teachers and specialists involved in particular professional-development endeavors; parents and community members dedicated to the welfare of the school; and outside specialists hired to facilitate some aspect of the school-reform effort. Indeed, there are already many gatherings in this school.

Each gathering is a potential site for dialogue, for the respectful sharing of views and values, the reciprocal teaching and learning about different perspectives and experiences, the effort to understand the Other and to thereby develop

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a stronger, more authentic relationship with her or him. From such strong relationships come strong programs.

Some, many, or nearly all of these gatherings may already incorporate respectful and inclusive dialogue. Some may not, but rather may be characterized by hierarchy, disinterest, disinvestment, or by silence, views unspoken, disagreements unvoiced. They will most probably have a mix of these characteristics.

After I learn more about what is going on, I am going to try to participate in these gatherings – as a dialogic evaluator – and promote, advance and encourage dialogue within them. I will endeavor to do so by collecting information likely to be of interest to one gathering or another (and related to my intended evaluation focus), asking for time on their agenda, sharing the information and, through critical questions, asking for reactions, discussion, comments, implications and so forth. I intend to do this repeatedly with selected gatherings (those closest to my intended evaluation focus), as dialogue may take time to learn. As needed, I will work with strong facilitators, preferably from the school community, to help with this inter-relational task.

Yes, I have an evaluation design and yes, I will do things recognizable as program evaluation – like gathering and analyzing data, and working with members of the setting to develop warranted judgments of quality. I will probably even have a written report. But, in dialogic evaluation, these are not center stage activities. Rather, what is center stage is engagement – members of this community with the concerns and issues that structure and define their work with one another and their practices of reform, members of this community with one another, and me with this school community. Dialogic evaluation seeks to be of the world, not just to report on it.

And finally, I am especially welcoming of this school-reform evaluation context and the opportunity it presents to engage in issues of diversity and difference. As noted, I believe that coming to terms with human diversity and difference is the most important global challenge we currently face. Throughout the globe, our current differences are still being addressed with strife, warfare and bloodshed, and with discrimination, rejection and domination, rather than with talking and listening, teaching and learning.

As we practice our evaluative craft amidst this strife, we can be engaged with it or not. I clearly believe we must be engaged, for to do otherwise is to sanction continued discrimination and hatred. Dialogue – as a vision of learning about our differences and moving towards legitimizing and accepting them – represents an important avenue for this engagement.

## **Note**

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