Evaluative Thinking: Principles and Practices to Enhance Evaluation Capacity and Quality

13 September, 2018

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Assistant Professor
Please share:

1. Your name
2. Your organization
3. Your area of work
goals
At the end of this session, you will know:

1. What evaluative thinking (ET) is and how it pertains to your context;

2. How to promote and strengthen ET among individuals and organizations with whom you work; and

3. How to use ET to identify assumptions, articulate program theory, and conduct evaluation with an emphasis on learning and adaptive management.
roles for today
Evaluation is an activity. *Evaluative thinking is a way of doing business.* This distinction is critical. It derives from studies of evaluation use. Evaluation is more useful—and actually used—when the program and organizational culture manifests evaluative thinking.

- Michael Quinn Patton

Preface to 2014 InterAction Report, Embracing Evaluative Thinking for Better Outcomes: Four NGO Case Studies
world café on learning and evaluation culture
(1) *Under what conditions does evaluation contribute to learning?*

(2) *What makes a “culture of evaluation” in an organization or program?*
introduction
to
evaluative
thinking
introduction to evaluative thinking
introduction to evaluative thinking
introduction to evaluative thinking

(Patton, 2008)
introduction to evaluative thinking
Evaluative thinking is critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation and program management, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves:

1. identifying assumptions,
2. posing thoughtful questions,
3. pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and multiple perspective taking, and
4. making informed decisions in preparation for action.

(Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves, & Trochim, 2015)
introduction to evaluative thinking
introduction to evaluative thinking

Evaluation requires:

- Knowledge: understanding of the “how” and “why” of basic M&E concepts, terms, methods and resources
- Working skills: observation, analysis, communication, etc.
- Thinking skills: reflection, questioning, strategizing, mental modeling, perspective taking, decision making, the ability to identify assumptions
- Attitudes: belief in the value of M&E, an intrinsic motivation to pursue evidence
“Evaluative thinking is a way of doing business.” (Patton)

“…being results oriented, reflective, questioning, and using evidence to test assumptions.” (Wind & Carden)

“Reflective Practice” (Baker & Bruner)

“questioning, reflecting, learning, and modifying … It is a constant state-of-mind within an organization’s culture and all its systems.” (Bennett & Jessani)
free-range evaluation:
evaluative thinking that lives unfettered in an organization

(King, 2007)
Alignment: the new gold standard in evidence
INTERNAL ALIGNMENT
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Intended Claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is participation in our program associated with an increase in knowledge?</td>
<td>Measure knowledge using a survey both before (pre-) and after (post-) the program</td>
<td>Score pre- and post-surveys and compare scores for each individual participant</td>
<td>Participants demonstrated an increase in knowledge after participating in the program as compared to before</td>
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MISALIGNMENT
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<th>Question</th>
<th>Method</th>
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<td>Can participants perform [X skill] after participating in the program?</td>
<td>Interview each participant about their knowledge of [X skill] both before and after the program.</td>
<td>Thematically code the interviews, allowing for emergent themes related to knowledge.</td>
<td>Participation in the program causes an increase in participants knowledge in a variety of ways.</td>
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practicing evaluative thinking

- Requires a “safe space” for questioning, identifying assumptions, making suggestions (consider power dynamics)
- Start with outside examples and then work inward
- Practice alongside peers and colleagues – build skills and establish trust
Guiding Principles for Promoting Evaluative Thinking

I. Promoters of evaluative thinking should be opportunistic about engaging learners in evaluative thinking processes in a way that builds on and maximizes intrinsic motivation (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Brookfield, 2012; Piaget, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978).

II. Promoting evaluative thinking should incorporate incremental experiences, following the developmental process of “scaffolding” (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Brookfield, 2012).

III. Evaluative thinking is not a born-in skill, nor does it depend on any particular educational background; therefore, promoters should offer opportunities for it to be intentionally practiced by all who wish to develop as evaluative thinkers (Brookfield, 2012; Ericsson & Charness, 1994).

IV. Evaluative thinkers must be aware of—and work to overcome—assumptions and belief preservation (Brookfield, 2012; Lord et al., 1979; Nkwake, 2013).

V. In order to best learn to think evaluatively, the skill should be applied and practiced in multiple contexts and alongside peers and colleagues (Bransford et al., 1999; Brookfield, 2012; Foley, 1999; Halpern, 1998; Simon, 2000).
what does Evaluative Thinking sound and look like?

Photo of: Gender Analysis- CRS Ethiopia
Evaluative Thinking: what it sounds and looks like in a program work context

Things you may hear:
- Why are we assuming X?
- How do we know X?
- How might we be wrong?
- What evidence do we have for X?
- What is the thinking behind the way we do X?
- How could we do X better?
- How does X connect to our intended outcomes?
- Stakeholder X’s perspective on this might be Y!

Things you may see:
- More evidence gathering and sharing
- More feedback (all directions)
- Reflective conversations among staff, beneficiaries, leadership
- More ToCs/illustrating thinking
- More motivation to do systematic M&E work
- Program evolution
- More effective staff and programs
- Greater field staff influence over project decisions
• Identify an example from your own work when you have seen, heard, or engaged in evaluative thinking. What was the outcome or effect?

• Discuss in a two- or three-person buzz group and prepare to share out one example per group.
“If we teach proper nutrition, youth will make more healthy food choices.”

What are the underlying assumptions here?
Uncovering these often “buried” or un-stated assumptions to light can affect your:

- Program plan
- Evaluation plan
- Interpretation of evaluation results
Are assumptions always “bad?”

No! Assumptions are a necessary part of survival!! We all make assumptions.

The important thing is to identify assumptions and be conscience about choosing to accept them, seek evidence for them, or plan to “work around them” as needed.
Types of Assumptions

• **causal**: about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed. e.g., *If we do X, then Y will result.*

• **prescriptive**: about what we think ought to or should be happening in a particular situation. e.g., *All projects must have a gender component.*

• **paradigmatic**: deeply held foundational beliefs about the world, like a world view. e.g., *Scientific knowledge is fundamentally better than indigenous knowledge.*

Brookfield (2012)
identifying & working with assumptions
Assumption Brainstorm (5 minutes)

1. Think about your everyday life (outside of work). What sorts of assumptions do you make?
2. With your break out group, brainstorm a few assumptions in any of the categories below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Causal</th>
<th>Prescriptive</th>
<th>Foundational</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) in everyday life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2) in the media</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3) in your program/org</td>
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The Mayor has decided that she wants to make addressing homelessness a major focus this year. Working with the city council, they contract with a university researcher who studies homelessness, who is brought in for 2 weeks to study the situation and propose a course of action. The researcher accesses administrative data from the police and health departments about incidence of homelessness, and also visits one government-run shelter that provides hot meals. The researcher then proposes a PR campaign to use posters on bus stations to educate homeless people about services available to them, and also suggests using vouchers to pay for hotel rooms for some homeless people in urgent cases.
Scenario Analysis

1. What assumptions—explicit and implicit—do you think the characters in the story are operating under? List as many as you can.

2. Of the assumptions you’ve listed, which ones could the characters check by simple inquiry? How could they do this?

3. Give an alternative interpretation of this scenario—a version of what’s happening that is consistent with the events described but that you think the character would disagree with or has not noticed.

Adapted from Brookfield (2012a; 2012b)
pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking

Thinking Hats Exercise

Edward de Bono
6 Thinking Hats Exercise

- **Optimistic response** (Yellow) – Positive. Logic applied to identifying benefits, seeking harmony.
- **Discernment** (Black) – Negative. Logic applied to identifying reasons to be cautious, critical, and conservative.
- **Emotions** (Red) - Intuitive or instinctive gut reactions or statements of emotional feeling (but not any justification).
- **Creativity** (Green) - Statements of provocation and investigation, seeing where a thought goes.
- **Information** (White) - Considering purely what information is available, what are the facts?
- **Managing** (Blue) - What is the subject? What are we thinking about? What is the goal?
Imagine next week you present a proposal to your organization to instill intentional ET work as a new part of your program’s M&E system.

In small groups, assign a different color hat to each group member.

Discuss the ET proposal, from your ‘colored hat’ perspective, allowing each group member to have a say from their perspective (i.e. according to their hat color).

Be prepared to report out on the various ideas that are discussed.

You have 20 minutes.
modeling & diagramming thinking
modeling & diagramming thinking

Introduction to Pathway Models
modeling & diagramming thinking

“I think you should be more explicit here in step two.”
Assumptions, conjectures, and other miracles: The application of evaluative thinking to theory of change models in community development

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Once upon a time, there was a workshop.

Immediately after the workshop, some small changes occurred.

Some time later, these smaller changes led to larger, more significant changes.

Over time, these more significant changes contributed to a healthier community where people lived happier ever after.
Looks complex? Programs are complex! We should reflect this complexity in our models, and consider it in planning and M&E work!

Pathway Model

Camp Staff training for Summer Camp energy programming

CITs and summer camp counselors learn skills in delivering camper workshops

Renewable Energy
Camp Activities - 50 min modules

Campers have positive attitude towards energy conservation

Campers have positive attitude towards energy conservation

Camper knowledge of Energy Conservation increases

4-H Youth Camp participants demonstrate energy conservation behavior

4-H Youth Camp participants demonstrate energy conservation behavior

Youth implement energy saving practices at home

Youth have positive attitude towards energy/green careers

Youth viewed as energy resource in community

Youth enter green workforce

4-H Camps more financially sustainable

CCE Recognized as source of energy conservation strategies by community decision makers

Camp Staff Energy Conservation Trainings

Counselors in Training (CITs) implement energy inventory

Camp Staff knowledge of energy conservation increases

Awareness of camp-specific opportunities for saving energy

Camp Staff (administration) are motivated to implement energy conservation strategies

Camp staff know energy savings operations

Camp and CCE Staff knowledge of Camp energy savings measures increases

Camps implement energy savings operations

Camps reduce carbon footprint on earth

Camps reduce energy cost

Youth view energy use as sustainable
Pathway Model

1. Review and critique the pathway model on the slide
2. Identify assumptions in and around the pathway model provided
promoting Evaluative Thinking

Building capacity is ultimately about building relationships.
create an intentional evaluative thinking learning environment
1. Display logic models
2. Create “parking lots” for questions and assumptions
3. Post inspirational questions:
   - “Is there an alternative explanation?”
   - “How do we know what we think we know?”
establish ET practice-focused discussions and/or meetings
1. “Mine” your model

2. Use opening questions (Brookfield, 2012)
   a. What assumptions are we working under?
   b. How can we check our assumptions for accuracy?
   c. What alternative perspectives or explanations might we use?

3. Conduct a media critique (Taylor-Powell, 2010)

4. Engage in critical debate (neutral but relevant topic)
use role-play when thinking about evaluation strategies
1. Scenario analysis (Brookfield, 2012)
2. Thinking hats (De Bono, 1999)
3. Evaluation simulation
diagram or illustrate thinking when communicating with colleagues
1. Build logic and pathway models

2. Diagram program history

3. Create a system, context or organization diagram
engage in supportive, critical peer review
1. Logic model review
2. Critical conversation protocol  (Brookfield, 2012)
3. Appreciative pause  (Brookfield, 2012)
establish time and space to explore intrinsically motivated evaluation questions both formally and informally

don’t leave evaluation exclusively to the evaluator(s)!
Potential practical applications

Enabling Environment
- Governments that are open to questioning and different perspectives
- Donors that are open to questioning and are flexible in their funding
- Trust-based relationships with government, donors, peer organizations, and communities
- Functioning national or regional evaluation networks

Organizational
- Organizational culture supportive of inquiry, reflection, and learning
- Leadership and senior management support for evaluative thinking
- Influential organizational champions for evaluative thinking
- Strategies, policies, and practices that encourage questioning, reflection, and evidence-based decision making
- Staff dedicated to promoting evaluative thinking
- Budget dedicated for evaluative thinking activities
- Job descriptions and performance plans that prioritize and reward evaluative thinking
- Investments in staff’s evaluative thinking capacities
- Processes that engage partner organizations and communities in evaluative thinking processes

Individual
- Staff attitude and mindset, including willingness to question assumptions and seek evidence
- Staff knowledge and skills for engaging in evaluative thinking, including skills related to listening, facilitation, and participatory monitoring and evaluation
- Membership or participation in M&E networks or associations

(Griñó, Levine, Porter, & Roberts, 2014)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Examples of Activities</th>
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| 1. Create an intentional ET learning environment                           | a) Display logic models in the workplace—in meeting rooms, within newsletters, etc.  
b) Create public spaces to record and display questions and assumptions.  
c) Post inspirational questions, such as, “How do we know what we think we know?” (Patton, 2005).  
d) Highlight the learning that comes from successful programs and evaluations and also from “failures” or dead ends. |
| 2. Establish a habit of scheduling meeting time focused on ET              | a) Have participants “mine” their logic model for information about assumptions and how to focus evaluation work (for example, by categorizing outcomes according to stakeholder priorities) (CORE, 2012).  
b) Use “opening questions” to start an ET discussion, such as, “How can we check our assumptions for accuracy?” (Brookfield, 2012); “What plausible alternative explanations are there for this finding?” (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).  
c) Engage in critical debate on a neutral topic.  
d) Conduct a media critique (critically review and identify assumptions in a published article, advertisement, etc.) (Taylor-Powell, 2010). |
| 3. Use role-play when planning evaluation work                            | a) Conduct a scenario analysis (have individuals or groups analyze and identify assumptions embedded in a written description of a fictional scenario) (Brookfield, 2012).  
b) Take on various stakeholder perspectives using the “thinking hats” method in which participants are asked to role play as a particular stakeholder (DeBono, 1999).  
c) Conduct an evaluation simulation (simulate data collection and analysis for your intended evaluation strategy). |
| 4. Diagram or illustrate thinking with colleagues                         | a) Have teams or groups create logic and pathway models (theory of change diagrams or causal loop diagrams) together (CORE, 2012).  
b) Diagram the program’s history.  
c) Create a system, context and/or organization diagram. |
| 5. Engage in supportive, critical peer review                            | a) Review peer logic models (help identify leaps in logic, assumptions, strengths in their theory of change, etc.).  
b) Use the Critical Conversation Protocol (a structured approach to critically reviewing a peer’s work through discussion) (Brookfield, 2012).  
c) Take an appreciative pause (stop to point out the positive contributions, and have individuals thank each other for specific ideas, perspectives or helpful support) (Brookfield, 2012). |
| 6. Engage in evaluation                                                  | a) Ensure that all evaluation work is participatory and that members of the organization at all levels are offered the opportunity to contribute their perspectives.  
b) Encourage members of the organization to engage in informal, self-guided evaluation work.  
c) Access tools and resources necessary to support all formal and informal evaluation efforts (including the support of external evaluators, ECB professionals, data analyzers, etc.). |
**Evalutative Thinking Learning-to-Action Plan Template**

**PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE** To help you apply the lessons and skills learned here to your work. With most professional development workshops, it is often difficult to actually go back to your day-to-day work and actually put something learned or gained from the workshop into practice. The purpose of this plan is for you and your colleagues to come up with a concrete plan to use ET in the next three months and over the upcoming year.

Please fill in the blanks below (*use additional paper as needed*):

What do you *know* now that you didn't know yesterday?

What can you *do* now that you couldn't do yesterday?

What could you *teach* someone to know or do that you couldn't teach them this time yesterday?

Which *specific activities* that we practiced today could you use in your work? *Describe how the activity will look in reality (imagine you are looking through a window at yourself doing the activity)*.