

Fly high, go deep, add value: characteristics of ‘black belt’ evaluators

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In this paper I discuss the characteristics of an expert evaluator. My thesis is that the expert evaluator—the ‘black belt’ in the field—is characterised by taking a broad view that sees patterns where others see points; by delving deep for root causes where others see surface explanations; and by emphasising worth and value. This paper is a thought piece and a reflection—its aim is to stimulate debate and discussion rather than to offer definitive conclusions.

The intent of this paper is to explore what it is that makes a ‘black belt’ evaluator; that is, someone who is a recognised expert in the area with demonstrated mastery. The thesis of the paper is that expertise/mastery in evaluation involves more than just the superior acquisition of the same set of skills, attributes or competencies that define ‘an evaluator’; rather expertise/mastery involves an additional set of qualities. These additional qualities are taking the macro perspective and a focus on value for the client.

The structure of this paper is as follows. After discussing why I think it matters to consider ‘black belt’ evaluators, and what ‘black belt’ means, I describe the work in Australia and New Zealand on evaluator competencies. Next, I consider from a theoretical perspective the nature of competence and expertise before considering how competence models fit within an expert–novice framework. I then draw on the literature on expert–novice differences to hypothesise areas in which expert and novice evaluators might differ.

Why does this matter?

There are several reasons to consider what skills, attributes and competencies make up an ‘evaluator’. One is from a training and professional development perspective—a clear articulation of these forms a framework for training programs for new evaluators and development programs for current evaluators. Another is to define a field or a profession—a description of those things that delineate the profession of evaluation from other professions. Yet another is to enhance understanding of the field for the purposes of developing that field and, through so doing, developing practitioners in the field. It is the last reason that this paper mainly addresses.

Evaluation is a relatively young field and is characterised more by action than introspection. The dearth of introspection was noted by Henry and Mark (2003), who argued for the ‘need for cumulative evidence about evaluation itself ... to provide an empirical basis for improving practice’ (p. 70). This highlights the

crucial nexus between understanding the nature of the field and the quality of practice. Christie (2003), in a review of her own doctoral research, noted that few evaluators, except evaluation theorists, report being guided by theory. But does it matter that evaluation in practice is not explicitly guided by theory, or that the field has a dearth of introspection?

Sanders (2003) provides a pointer to why it does matter that the field of evaluation looks at itself. He poses the question: 'If evaluation is seen as the means to the ends of successfully reaching goals ... of moving even closer to excellence, why is it still in the margins of organisations?' (p. 3). The answer to this question is broader than that evaluation has not reflected sufficiently on its own practice, but the question is still a powerful spur to evaluators. Sanders takes the position of a potential client, who asks of an evaluator: 'Can you point to organisations like ours that are successful because of their evaluation practices?' (p. 3). That, by and large, we can't do so suggests that there is something in our practice, and in our practitioners, that could be improved.

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'Black belt'

The use of the term 'black belt' draws on the use within various forms of martial arts of different coloured belts to signify differing levels of mastery of the art—with the black belt representing the highest level of mastery. The term is also used with the Six Sigma process improvement methodology—which draws strongly on Japanese concepts—to refer to people with a distinct, higher level of mastery of the discipline.

Using the term 'mastery' here is not accidental—it has two common senses. One is of competence ('she has mastered the technique of multiple regression') and the other is of peak performance ('she is a master of multiple regression'). When I use the term 'black belt' I deliberately want to evoke some of the mystery that surrounds that mastery—the sense that it is a pinnacle that few achieve and then only with sustained effort.

In thinking about black belt evaluators some questions arise: Is there such a thing? How does one get there? Does it matter? To the first, there is no empirical evidence that they do or do not exist, but it seems more likely than not that they do since peak performance exists in almost every other field of

human endeavour. For the purposes of this paper, I take the existence of expert evaluators as a given.

The purpose of this paper is to canvass the issues around these questions, and to offer some answers. The genesis of the paper was in reflections on my experience and practice as a leader and manager of evaluation and research teams over a number of years. It crystallised in a presentation to the AES 2005 International Conference, and benefited from discussion and feedback during and after that presentation.

The journey to understanding the black belt begins with understanding the skills, attributes and competencies of the field.

Evaluator competencies

This section describes the work on evaluator competencies in Australia and New Zealand. There is a general observation that evaluation as practised in Australia and New Zealand represents a different 'dialect' of the evaluation language from that spoken in Europe or in North America. This difference, if it exists, is a reason to look within for clues to expertise rather than outside. This section draws on the work English (2002) and Allan Gomes and his colleagues (Gomes & Daly 2004).

The question of evaluator competencies has been considered previously within the AES from the perspective of training and professional development. English (2002) reported on the results of a web-based survey among AES members on the four competency dimensions of:

- Knowledge/Cognitive Competence—'the possession of appropriate work-related knowledge and the ability to put this to effective use'
- Functional Competence—'the ability to perform a range of work-based tasks effectively to produce specific outcomes'
- Personal/Behavioural Competence—'the ability to adopt appropriate, observable behaviours in work-related situations'
- Values/Ethical Competence—'the possession of appropriate personal values and the ability to make sound judgements based upon these in work-related situations'. (p. 13)

These competency dimensions arose from work by a four-person committee, which detailed the components of each dimension, as shown in Table 1.

While one may concur with the four dimensions and their atomisation into components, the translation into a development and training framework may be a little problematic—and probably a reason why little further was done. For instance, how does one train or develop the competency of tenacity?

Gomes and Daly (2004) at the Ministry of Social Development in New Zealand presented six generic competencies:

TABLE 1: EVALUATOR COMPETENCY DIMENSIONS AND COMPONENTS

D I M E N S I O N S				
C O M P O N E N T	Knowledge/Cognitive	Functional	Personal/Behavioural	Values/Ethical
	background	focus	organisational	personal
	role	design	awareness	professional
	context	data collection	problem-solving	
	methods	data analysis	analytical thinking	
	conduct	report	conceptual thinking	
	communication	project management	self-control	
	organisation	meta-evaluation	self-confidence	
		tenacity		
		initiative		
		impact		
		communication		
		teamwork		
		professional development		

- critical thinking, analysis and problem-solving
- technical expertise
- communication
- sociopolitical awareness and sector knowledge
- customer focus and relationship management
- teamworking.

They presented behavioural descriptors, essentially standards referents, in each competency for junior and senior practitioners. The main differentiator is complexity.

As an aside, from these two quite differently structured lists—English’s four dimensions and 28 components; Gomes and Daly’s six competencies—I synthesise five skill areas:

- methods (program logic, design, forms and approaches, data collection, data analysis)
- critical thinking (problem-solving, analytical and conceptual thinking)
- communication (reporting, negotiating, understanding, listening, talking)
- awareness (organisational, situational, little ‘p’ political)
- customer focus (client needs and wants, client freedom of action to keep, discard, create and change)

The work reported by English (2002) and Gomes and Daly (2004) is useful in understanding what competencies or capabilities an evaluator ought to have in order to be competent, and the differentiation of junior and senior by Gomes and Daly is an implicit acknowledgement that competency is not a unitary concept. But there is more to becoming a practitioner in a field than

a checklist of competencies, and there are some difficulties with the competency description approach.

The key difficulty with defining a task or role by its apparently constituent competencies is the understanding of the term ‘competency’. One understanding of competency is as an atomisation of a task into its component parts—the competencies—that when acquired allow a person to complete the task. In this understanding, exemplified in the Australian Qualifications Framework¹, a competency has two rather than many states; there is a threshold above which one is ‘competent’ and below which one is ‘not yet competent’ (with the implication that competency is achievable in the future). Once a person has demonstrated that they are above this threshold, under specified conditions, they are presumed to remain competent.

When applied to a task or a role this understanding of competency means that once a person is competent on the component parts the person is competent to undertake the role. However, this dichotomous, threshold understanding of competency doesn’t recognise the degrees of competence that our intuitive understanding of the world tells us is the case. Some people are more skilled or better at tasks than others. This intuitive understanding brings us to the concept of differing levels of competence and what I term the ‘curve to competence’.

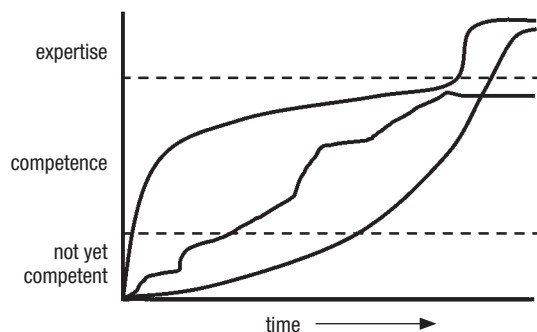
Curve to competence’

The concept of ‘curve to competence’ describes the path from not competent to highly competent. It is different from the oft-quoted four-stage process of unconsciously incompetent, consciously incompetent, consciously competent, and

unconsciously competent, which simply adds the dimension of awareness.

Competence is here not understood in the simplistic sense of competency-based training, but in the professional sense of reliably being able to do something to a professional standard, or produce a professional standard product. It contains the idea of personal mastery (Senge 1990) and of professional mastery. The curve to competence may be smooth but is more often a series of steps. The curve to competence thus has a functional and temporal component. It contains the idea of levels of competence (from novice to expert), of skills and knowledge acquired, and the idea of time taken to acquire these. Figure 1 shows three possible curves on the path to competence and expertise.

FIGURE 1: CURVE TO COMPETENCE



The notion of curve to competence is embedded in professional and trades training. In trades training it is the apprenticeship where the novice learns from the master; in professions it is the period of formal training at a tertiary institution followed by the supervised period of practice (articles, internship, etc.) where experience is added to knowledge and skills.

Competence, once achieved, often requires maintenance. Skills atrophy; knowledge becomes outdated. Time alone does not lead to higher levels, and nor does 'experience'—recalling the jibe that a teacher may not have 30 years experience, but one year's experience repeated 29 times.

Transition from expert to novice

Referring to Figure 1, it is the transition from competence to expertise in the curve to competence model that is the core of this paper. Is this transition a relatively smooth progression, or is it a quantum steps? Does, or can, everyone progress to highly competent and expertise?

The atomisation of roles and tasks into components called competencies suggests what I term the 'ladder' model: each skill set or competency is a ladder to be climbed, with thresholds or rungs past which a person is deemed competent in that

skill set. Role competency occurs when a person has climbed sufficiently high on each ladder as to pass the 'competent' rung on each. Extending the conception of competence to include high competence, in the ladder model this would mean being at or near the top rung of each ladder. But, does this model extend to expertise?

The literature on expert–novice differences across a wide range of domains indicates that there are differences of kind as well as degree between experts and novices. High competency and practice are important elements—experts are very good and very practised across the required skill sets. But high competence and practice are not enough—experts also are characterised by being adaptable and by seeing, or sensing, patterns. These characteristics both mediate current performance and facilitate improved performance through feedback (Ericsson & Lehmann 1996). It is this pattern-sensing or pattern-seeing that represents the difference in kind rather than degree between novices and experts.

The existence of qualitative differences suggests that crossing the threshold from highly competent to expert relates more to possession of these characteristics than simply being highly skilled and practised in the skill sets that define the field of endeavour. I use a sporting analogy—choose whichever code of football you wish and think of the exceptional players. What usually characterises them is their ability to 'read' the game and often to position themselves just where the ball will be. This is because they have seen the pattern and flow of the game in ways that others have not.

So, from the study of expert–novice differences, pattern perception seems a key element.

Characteristics of the expert evaluator: fly high, go deep, add value

In this last, and most speculative, part of this paper, I want to propose what, from my reflections, distinguishes the black belt evaluator from the highly competent evaluator.

The seed for this was Kirkpatrick's (1998) four levels of evaluation for training programs: reaction to training, transfer of knowledge, change in behaviour, results in the organisation. To which Phillips (1997) has added a fifth level, that of return on investment (ROI). An evaluation that focuses purely on reaction is limited in both time and perspective, whereas an evaluation that includes results and ROI takes both a longer term view and broader perspective, and adds an emphasis on value. The two elements then are view and value.

I see a parallel between the levels of evaluation of training and program evaluation in general and then, by extension, to program evaluators. What I think distinguishes the black belt evaluator from the highly competent are three things: view, value and depth. I capture these as flying high (to give the broad and long view), going deep (to find root causes) and adding value.

What do I mean by fly high and go deep? They refer to ways of seeing and methods of analysis and enquiry. To fly high is to take a macro view, what is called the 'helicopter view', and see the larger picture and the interrelationships in that picture. To fly high also means to take a long-term view, and consider things on a larger time scale than the here-and-now. To go deep is to go beyond the surface features, and look both for root causes and for second, third, and higher order effects. To fly high and go deep is to emphasise both breadth and depth.

Flying high and going deep is also concerned with patterns. Taking the macro view allows one to see patterns that are not evident from smaller scale views—not seeing the wood for the trees. Going deep allows one to see underlying patterns of relationship and interaction.

The third distinguishing characteristic of the black belt evaluator is adding value. The expert evaluator looks for ways to add value, which may even involve reframing the evaluation. The term 'adding value' often evokes a negative reaction because of its association with a financial perspective, yet value is at the root, literally, of evaluation. Evaluation is a form of systematic inquiry to discern value, and the expert evaluator has a focus on producing value for the client. This may be through valuable information for the client, but more often is through valuable utilisation by the client of the evaluation.

So what?

The purpose of this paper was to explore the notion of the black belt evaluator with the intent to enhance understanding of the field. It was explicitly a thought piece and a reflection.

The work on competencies that preceded this paper came from the implicit perspective that these competencies are things that all will possess to a greater or lesser extent, and that they define what it is to be an evaluator, and through that, what evaluation means. My proposition is that expert evaluators do possess this range of competencies but also have more—they have the capacity to fly high, go deep and add value. And it is these elements that truly define the field—the role of the evaluator is to see things that others don't see, to find explanations that others don't find, and, above all, to add value for the client.

Note

- 1 The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is a unified system of national qualifications in schools, vocational education and training and the higher education sector, and covers qualifications from senior secondary through to doctoral level. For further information see <<http://www.aqf.edu.au>>.

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