

Looking Outwards Not Inwards: *Reflecting on Evaluation Futures*

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Outwards not Inwards

Pre-occupations of the evaluation community are often inward-looking

- In whose interests should we be working?
 - What methods should we use?
- How is the community to be controlled?

Outwards not Inwards

In whose interests?

Should we confine our attentions to the concerns of policy-makers, become the advocates of a wider public interest or try to give voice to the marginalised? And how is this expressed: as a commercial contract with clients, relationships with citizens or the 'objects' of study, partnerships in a collaborative endeavour?

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What methods?

We have the familiar fights between different scientific paradigms, different disciplines, domain favourites and advocates of particular toolkits.

We also increasingly face the risk of the politicisation of methods: evaluation commissioners who favour those methods that are likely to support their policy goals

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Controlling the community?

How to control entry to work roles, standards,
progression & financial rewards

‘Professionalization’ if you like, even though the
conditions for professionalization in the strict
sense do not apply – we are more controlled by
markets and to a lesser extent educational
institutions

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Drivers of these pre-occupations are clear, they are largely a response to external pressures

- A market that has matured fast with competitive pressures, demands for 'quality' & standards
 - Sophisticated procurement systems and 'commodified' evaluations
 - A policy system concerned with its own legitimacy in the face of rising expectations, falling resources & threats to social cohesion
- Public authorities that are risk averse, fear failure and need tools for justification

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I have two objections to evaluations internally focussed discourse:

First we are missing opportunities to strengthen and diffuse evaluative thinking and practice

Second we may not be aware of upcoming systemic changes likely to shape evaluation futures

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In the present here are two challenges in the present in particular:

- The emergence of evaluation as a pervasive activity well outside the world of evaluation
- The changing nature of what now has to be evaluated

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Implicit in the goal of professionalization is the belief in the distinctiveness of what we do. The problem here is how we delimit what is 'distinctive'

If we follow a standard evaluation logic, not very much!

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Consider for a moment:

- Market regulators, inspection regimes, arms length agencies, performance managers, efficiency & effectiveness audits, self review by practitioners
- They all have a concern for standards, success and performance; for gathering evidence; and for deciding what should be done once they know what's going on? They are all part of the reflexive apparatus of our times?

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However they don't all study and reflect on:

- Making judgement, calibrated to different values, circumstances & forms of evidence
- Process understandings, organisational design, working with many stakeholders, consensus building
- How to plan & integrate action & change strategies with knowledge use
 - Working across institutional settings/policy domains and exploring linkages across
 - Ethical issues in real-world settings

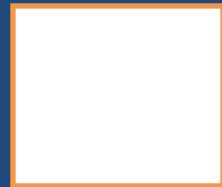
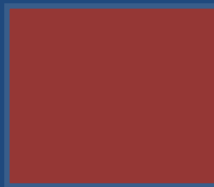
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These are competences have potential currency in many markets – they constitute the core of an evaluation practice that is not the sole prerogative of an evaluation discipline or profession

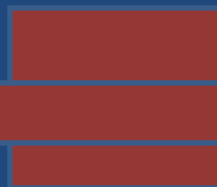
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Depicting the difference in scope between a 'discipline' and a 'practice'

Discipline



Practice



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Having read various 'competency' lists & frameworks I fear that the main thrust of the professionalization movement in evaluation is narrowing rather than broadening our scope of activities – 'get the wagons in a circle' to defend ourselves, to use a 'wild west' metaphor!

I would prefer to see the future of evaluation as practice not a profession – a practice that many engage in but not everyone does very well!

Outwards not Inwards

The second leg of my argument about the 'present' is that what is out there to evaluate has changed. This is expressed as new policy goals and new policy instruments.

The formative context derives from current model of public management & policy making.

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Not only management assumptions and ideologies but also different types of policy goals:

Healthy living rather than immunisation and clean water supplies

Lifelong learning rather than pupil attainment

Enterprise culture rather than business start-ups

Innovation systems rather than R&D subsidies

Policy goals are correlated with new policy instruments

Outwards not Inwards

We now take for granted:

- New forms of coordination and multi-level governance
 - Decentralisation and 'marketisation'
 - Risk aversion & risk 'dumping'
- Resistance to regulation and the invention of new non regulatory policy instruments
- Crises of legitimacy in authority distorting the policy promises being made

Outwards not Inwards

As a result different policy scenarios now co-exist:

- A decision-making, linear, top-down, service provision scenario
- An iterative, negotiated but still mainly government orchestrated scenario
- A self-regulated, 'steered' through stakeholders & intermediaries scenario
- An exploratory, deliberative, consensus building and policy development scenario

Evaluators are far better towards the top of this list!

Outwards not Inwards

However a high proportion of public sector activity is in new forms of coordination, consortia, alliances subcontracting, norm-setting and private/public partnerships rather than in administratively unified structures that deliver services

Outwards not Inwards

The risk is that evaluators have become enthralled by the shrinking scope of the command and control/service delivery State and sharpen their tools & techniques to evaluate less and less more and more rigorously!

This is what I fear the more fundamentalist members of the 'impact' fraternity are doing

Outwards not Inwards

What we need to focus on are a host of new evaluation objects & policy 'instruments' that variously:

- Mobilise multiple stakeholders, experts and civil society
 - Attempt to frame and support self regulation through feedback, transparency and market signals
 - Deploy epistemic and community networks
- Seek to influence public opinion and build consensus as a precondition for public action
- Develop new 'contracts' between state & citizens through deliberative & representative democracy

Outwards not Inwards

- *Examples at international level:* post 'Paris Declaration' policies of 'alignment' and 'harmonisation'; Peer review among OECD countries
- *Examples at EU level:* Monitoring Committees of Structural Funds; 'Open Method of Coordination'
- *Examples in UK:* strategic use of partnerships, consortia and collaboratives; regulatory, improvement & inspection bodies; 'arms length' agencies – Human Fertilisation & Embryology Authority; Science & Society Strategy of the DTI; 'modernisation' strategies in local government

Outwards not Inwards

These are not evaluation objects that can easily be addressed with the traditional evaluation toolkit shaped in the optimistic days when policies addressing modest goals and delivered through monolithic administrations could be depicted by log-frames!

Outwards not Inwards

At this stage in an argument such as this someone usually challenges me by observing:

- Are there no limits to what you think evaluation practitioners should do? Surely we must delimit the scope of evaluation somehow. We're not that perfect in the more limited set of things we try to achieve at present!
- You want us to work across more boundaries and develop new methods and absorb new bodies of knowledge & practice....

Outwards not Inwards

I believe the 'delimitation' position which suggests we should accept what we do now and stick to that, leaving other things to regulators, inspectors, auditors and performance managers leads us up a dead-end. Similarly for arguments that the evaluation toolkit should confine itself to what was needed to assess 1950's Western bureaucracies.

Outwards not Inwards

Rather than 'delimitation' I am arguing that evaluation as practice rather than as a discipline or profession should expect to build bridges with other practices rather than stand apart – if we don't the risks of losing the ground we currently stand on is considerable.

So evaluators should be working more with regulators, performance managers, inspectors and auditors – and we need to systematize our practice so that it can form part of the core curriculum of other practices – the priority is not just to train evaluators!

Outwards not Inwards

We are probably coming to the end of an era when an inward orientation was understandable and justified. There are 'new kids on the block' who occupy some of the territory that in the past evaluators have claimed as their own. Building bridges with some of these other sites of reflective practice is a more effective strategy than turf wars.

Outwards not Inwards

So far I've been arguing that we look forward by dealing with ignored but present problems: the need to address 'no longer new' policy goals and instruments; to see ourselves more as a practice than a discipline

I also want to look forward and explore tentatively the links between evaluation practice and global socio-economic, political and environmental trends

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The argument is:

Evaluation is shaped by global dynamics that affect countries differently but nonetheless affect all countries in the end.

Many of the pre-occupations of evaluators are not the result of 'what we want' but of the opportunities that present themselves

Outwards not Inwards

Policy 'Drivers'	Policy Consequences	Policy Themes
Post war reconstruction	GDP growth Poverty reduction Reduced Inequality	Regulated 'Normalisation', Professionally-led
Social and technological innovation	Intermittent GDP growth Poverty reduction, BUT growing Marginalisation	Opening access to rights and resources Social justice
Global 'opening up'	Slower cyclical GDP growth Targeted poverty reduction Increased inequality	Rationed access to rights and resources Social inclusion
Decline of the 'West' Environmental limits and More regular 'disasters'	Low growth Poverty Increase? Increasing inequality?	Managing decline: how? Solidarity versus segmentation?

Outwards not Inwards

Dangers of 'crystal-balling' but do we expect a return to 'business as usual'?

There is a fair chance that the good old days (!) will not return and what has been the dominant 'theme' for nearly 25 years – social inclusion and social justice will be less supported in the coming decade

Outwards not Inwards

But how a period of decline is or is not managed could make a big difference.

Key question is whether the poor will be expected to pay a disproportionate share of the costs of decline?

Social theory would suggest that a critical determinant will be social solidarity that evaluators know much about....

Outwards not Inwards

So there is hope!

If we look outwards to the opportunities for diffusing evaluation practice – which are many

And

Even if the scenario of managed decline comes about, evaluators can make a contribution to analysis, judgement and solidarity

Outwards not Inwards

But the big message is that we do need to look outwards to the world that shapes our opportunities:

To build bridges to other sites of evaluative practice

Not to assume that the opportunities that characterised recent decades will characterise the decades to come

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