Evaluation and the democratic alternative: Problems of the past and partnerships for the future.

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Abstract
As accountability concerns direct the intent of curriculum evaluation in the 1990s, it is imperative for advocates of democratically-oriented evaluations to reflect critically on the acceptance of their theories and practice by the broader educational community.

This paper analyses the findings of the first stage of a more substantial study, which is directed towards the development and analysis of an evaluative approach that encompasses the democratic ideals of Robert Stake (1975) and Barry MacDonald (1976). The aim of the initial stage of the project was to review a broad range of evaluation literature and identify the past and current status of 'alternative' curriculum evaluations in Britain, the United States and Australia. The review highlights the impact of historical and cultural precedents, the inadequacy of existing methodological applications and the assumptions of recent critical and constructivist developments. These influences will be analysed in terms of their contribution to the prevailing perceptions of democratically-oriented evaluations. The
In the past, democratically-oriented evaluations may not necessarily have been the alternative that many of their advocates claimed them to be. In particular, proponents of alternative evaluation approaches may not have sufficiently considered the historical and cultural contexts of evaluation studies and may have been unable to respond effectively to the methodological complexity and political and ethical dimensions of a democratised evaluative process.

In the future, viable democratically-oriented approaches to evaluation will need to reconsider what Robert Stake (1975) and Barry MacDonald (1976) proposed; the value of all participants' perspectives, the ability to understand the workings of the curriculum and a focus on issues raised through the portrayal of multiple perspectives to inform curriculum understandings.

Evaluation and the Democratic Alternative.

The concept of curriculum evaluation has become enmeshed in the complexities of a changing educational and educational evaluation context.
Throughout the past thirty years, mainstream, formal educational evaluation has essentially sought to obtain and provide useful information for judging decision alternatives or has been designed to assist an audience or audiences to judge and improve the worth of some educational object so that 'significant' stakeholders can improve policies and programs. The key features of such evaluations have been:

their sponsorship by government, institutional and faculty leaders and educational administrators and managers;
their conceptualisation of quality and quality measurement in terms of government, institutional and administrative perceptions (which stakeholders have information and how that information should be abstracted);
their predication on the belief that curriculum outcomes are a suitable vehicle for curriculum investigation; and
their evaluative design rationale being directed by quantifying the realisation of curriculum objectives.

Since the 1970s, democratic alternatives to these mainstream approaches to evaluation have been developed, whereby evaluative information is democratically conceived, shared and utilised by all participants. The specific intent of such evaluations is the elaboration of curriculum understandings to better inform all program and curriculum participants. The key features of democratically-oriented evaluations are:

a sensitivity to the values of all stakeholder/participants.
the conceptualisation of quality and quality measurement in terms of the social construction of curriculum quality by a range of participant perspectives;
being predicated on the belief that curriculum/program activities are an important source of data to inform curriculum development;
an evaluative design rationale being directed by the qualification of multi-perspective curriculum issues to enhance curriculum understandings.

We argue in this paper that the aspirations of those who have advocated evaluative alternatives have been unattainable and as such have offered limited evaluative options to the seekers of curriculum knowledge. The argument explores three dimensions of the past applications of 'alternative' evaluations that collectively reveal the problematic nature of their acceptance within mainstream evaluation practice. First, the argument will consider how the combined influence of scientific methodology and a focus of economic rationalism may have inhibited the evolution of an evaluation counter-culture. Second, the impact of these historical and cultural influences on the development an effective and workable alternative evaluation methodology will be identified. Third, the argument will critique 'critical' and 'constructivist' adaptations of the democratic evaluation and highlight how their current contexts continue to consolidate ethical and methodological dilemmas. Finally this paper will consider the current
status of 'the democratic-alternative' and the possibility of future partnerships to address these problems of the past.

Historical and Cultural Contexts

The first dimension of the 'alternative' problematic has been the lack of recognition of the historical and cultural contexts of mainstream evaluation and the inhibiting impact these contexts have had on the evolution of an alternative evaluative culture. The historical context of curriculum evaluation for the past fifty years has been bounded and driven by an essentially scientific/instrumental rationale of curriculum. The origins of traditional approaches to curriculum evaluation can be attributed to the work of Tyler (1934) in his series of lectures entitled 'Basic principles of curriculum instruction'. Responding to a call for increased educational efficiency, Tyler attempted to explain a rationale for, "viewing, analysing and interpreting the curriculum and the instructional program of an educational institution" (Kemmis, 1986, p 44). The logic of Tyler's work operates on the assumption that education can be defined through a series of educational objectives, based on content and behavioural aspects. The substance of the 'objectives' model involves the appraisal of a curriculum to find out how far the objectives of an institution are being realised and a focus on student achievement, standardised criteria and comparative design. This scientifically-oriented approach developed unabated for three decades and by the 1980s was recognised as the dominant evaluative methodology. The claims of ideological efficiency, procedural simplicity, and scientific validity had made the objectives approach an attractive proposition to educational decision-makers, who needed 'hard' evaluative knowledge to direct educational futures.

While the expansive and anti-establishment ethos of the 1970s provided a moment of discovery for democratically-oriented evaluative ideals, the attractiveness of traditional approaches was dramatically enhanced by the cultural contexts of the decades to follow. The global economic crisis of the 1980s and the subsequent reconceptualisation of education as a key player in national economic sustainability, created the perfect cultural climate for an increased dependence on 'objectives' evaluation approaches. This traditional approach appeared almost 'made to fit' these new cultural manifestations. Its tried and extensively tested and adapted methodology produced the 'hard' data required to address increasing calls for accountability and the realisation of national and institutional goals.

Historically, alternative notions of curriculum evaluation have been given limited space in a society dominated by a scientific/instrumental conception of curriculum and curriculum evaluation. The cultural impact of the economically-driven 1980s and 1990s have, in many senses, created a societal perception that alternative curriculum evaluations are at
best, simply unnecessary. Understandably, such historical and cultural contexts provided only limited opportunities for proponents of democratic alternatives to refine and develop their methodological practice.

Ineffective and Unworkable Methodology

The second dimension of the 'alternative' problematic has been the apparent inability of the proponents of alternative evaluation approaches to resolve the complexity of the democratic evaluative process. It has centred on the difficulty for democratically-oriented methodology in creating valid democratic outcomes for the multiple stakeholders they seek to represent.

The essence of 'the democratic alternative' was formalised at Churchill College, Cambridge in late 1972. Here the advocates of an evaluative counter-culture (including Bob Stake, Malcolm Parlett, David Hamilton, Lou Smith, David Jenkins and Barry MacDonald) drafted and endorsed the 'Cambridge Manifesto' which essentially redefined the evaluation problem, revised the role of the evaluators and reformulated evaluative strategies for information gathering, data analysis and evaluative reporting (Norris, 1990).

While the theoretical and philosophical ideals of democratic and responsive approaches to educational evaluation remained seemingly clear and uncomplicated, the evolution and establishment of a suitable methodology and techniques to bring these ideals to life, within the realities of bureaucratically and hierarchically structured institutions, have often stumbled at a multitude of traditional organisational barriers. The methodology identified by democratic/responsive evaluators to achieve their pluralist ideals is generally referred to as 'case study method'.

In collaboration with educational researchers working towards the development of interpretative/naturalistic designs, the proponents of 'alternative' evaluations contributed significantly to the development of case study research designs, as an alternative to the procedures of scientific method. The adaptation of the case study approach, applied in more general interpretative/naturalistic research, to alternative evaluation is described as the 'condensed field work' approach (Walker, 1980).

In evaluation designs using case studies, the case worker is committed to both an in-depth portrayal of the intricacies of a particular program and the achievement of this portrayal within the limited time-frame of the evaluation. There appears to be little evidence in the literature of the development and extended application of the condensed fieldwork approach. In practical terms such an approach has usually meant that an external evaluator, commissioned by program sponsors or managers, would make a series of one or two day site visits over a period of a month. During these visits, the evaluator would collect a range of data, generally using techniques of observation, interview and document analysis. The analysis would consist of a series of portrayals of the perceptions of encountered stakeholder groups and
the presentation of these portrayals in a report to the evaluation sponsors and in some cases other program participants. It may be argued that it is extremely unlikely that such reports would be considered by multiple program stakeholders/participants as valid democratic outcomes. The improbability of achieving an in-depth portrayal of the intricacies of a particular program through the condensed fieldwork process has created a limited perception of the value of such an approach by a significant proportion of those responsible for and represented by the evaluation. Ten years after their introduction as an achievable methodological alternative, Stake (1988, p.263) notes that, in any form, "case studies are still considered as not quite legitimate in many places. And they do not seem to have the political clout that a statistical system has, particularly at a time of confrontation". Methodologically, the condensed fieldwork approach, when applied to formal program evaluation as an alternative to mainstream studies is burdened with serious time constraints, an inadequate range of time appropriate techniques and insufficient organisation and communication skills required by the evaluator. There have been growing concerns with the complexities of accuracy in observation and interview techniques and the suitability of analysis and presentation of findings. It was however the ethical assumptions of the case study approach to evaluation that evolved as the major methodological focus during the 1980s. The quest for valued representative perspectives from multiple stakeholders was potentially inhibited by its openness to evaluator mismanagement (whether intentional or coincidental), its potential co-option by politically informed interest groups and the confusion and conflict as the democratic rights of participants confronted their institutional obligations. Severe problems have been identified with researcher conduct in the field, particularly in relation to the confidentiality, publication and use of data (Walker, 1980). As Kemmis and Robottom (1981, p.151) commented, "In evaluation contexts, it is necessary for evaluators, sponsors, project and program participants and evaluation audiences to know that their different rights and their different interests are protected in the procedures of an evaluation study". Confronted with this methodological inability to create the valued democratic understandings aspired to, approaches to democratically-oriented evaluation were unlikely to have been considered a viable alternative by either prospective evaluators or more significantly the potential sponsors of curriculum evaluations. The technical and ethical concerns of an ineffective and unworkable methodology appear unresolved by the current proponents of alternative approaches to curriculum evaluation. The two approaches most commonly identified in the current 'alternative' context can be broadly categorised as critical and constructivist.

Critical and Constructivist Assumptions-The Current 'Alternative'
Context.
The third dimension of the 'alternative' problematic is the political assumptions of critical adaptations of evaluations and the methodological assumptions of constructivists/participatory approaches to such evaluations. As the realisation of the original responsive-democratic ideals became more elusive and the inability of evaluative practice to present a serious challenge to an increasingly vigorous mainstream evaluative culture became apparent, a number of evaluative researchers, motivated to address the ethical dilemmas of case study methodology moved beyond the focus of the democratic intent of evaluation. These researchers looked to critical theory and specifically the work of the 'Frankfurt School' and social theorist Jurgen Habermas, as a means of political redress.

The agenda of the evaluative alternatives moved from a democratic orientation to one of participant empowerment and the struggle for the disenfranchised to gain control over the forces that shape education. Critical evaluators openly advocated evaluation approaches that would expose and oppose the subjugating strategies of the dominant power structures established in education institutions (Codd, 1988). Mainstream evaluation was considered as a means to deflect potential criticism away from the fundamental policies of bureaucratic structures and ultimately as a mechanism of control. Democratically-oriented approaches were considered as impotent and unable to address critical issues. While this oppositional stance effectively alienated significant groups within the institutions, the methodological practices of these and other more recent applications remain unconvincing. Although the teacher-as-researcher and action-research movements have become much touted practical applications of this critical, participatory, advocacy perspective, their legitimacy as an ethically sound evaluative methodological alternative has been seriously questioned by many. Bartlett (1994) describes the historical application of the action research movement as misused and distorted with its ideas inveigled, co-opted, homogenised and technologised. Kemmis (1991, p.60), one of the founders of the movement in Australia stated that, "As far as I know, no one has got it right in action-research...".

The democratic orientation of sensitivity to all stakeholder values is distorted within these critical approaches. The perceived value of the perspectives of those who advocate for and align to institutional, government and sponsorship goals is conceptualised as being in conflict with those who advance curriculum goals.

The problem of practical sensitivity to all participant values is of equal concern for constructivist adaptations of the earlier democratised approaches. The constructivist approaches, using 'a/experimental' methods of naturalistic inquiry, have been extensively developed through the work of Egon Guba (1978). The evaluative product of over ten years of research by Guba and his colleague Yvonna Lincoln, has been the development of 'Fourth Generation Evaluation', which makes
claims that are very similar to those of the critical reflective models: of stakeholder empowerment, the valuing of multiple perspectives, consensual constructions and guaranteed evaluation usage. Some participatory researchers (O'Neill, 1995; Hart, Taylor & Robottom, 1994; Tesch, 1990) voice serious concerns about the frailties of participatory approaches to achieve their evaluative claims. They identify issues associated with the assumptions of conceptual parity, power imbalances, stakeholder passivity, the artificiality of group negotiations, and expectations and realities of evaluation usage. In 1992, Guba identified public and academic criticisms (perceptions) of Constructivist/Fourth Generation Evaluation applications as being overtly subjective, logically inconsistent, methodologically unbounded, non-referenced, epistemologically confused and lacking validity. Ironically, one of the major concerns is that both constructivist and critical designs rely heavily on the extensive theoretical understanding and practical expertise of the external facilitator. The assumptions of current adaptations of alternative approaches to evaluation appear to have done little to enhance their plausability to offer constructive and valid understandings of curriculum practice. The oppositional stance and the methodological impracticability of critical approaches and the potential corruptability of constructivist/participatory approaches add yet another dimension to the historical, cultural, methodological and ethical problems of the past.


Applications of the democratic and responsive evaluative ideals of Stake and MacDonald, which espouse a sensitivity to the values of all participants and a focus on program activities and the understanding of curriculum issues from multiple perspectives, appear to have had little impact in the field of higher education evaluation of the 1990s. While contemporary adaptations of these ideals continue to create certain tensions at the margins of curriculum development, their application in mainstream, formal curriculum/program evaluation is rarely considered significant. Stake and Clift (1995) identify the key intents of the existing evaluative culture in education as promotional, to create marketable products, as a guide to the behaviour of participants and linked to strategic concerns and institutional objectives. Bartlett (1994, p.60) observes that "Education systems in all sectors have been restructuring for greater efficiency, effectiveness and economy in the provision of educational services. The intent and profile of mainstream curriculum evaluation is now focused on a new era of 'quality' measurement that is firmly imbeded within a scientific, economic and technological rationale. It would seem clear that although democratically-oriented evaluation approaches may have achieved some
token acceptance in informal, formative professional development aspects. However they remain subsumed by a plethora of more traditional, bureaucratic models focused on behavioural objectives, technological concerns and accountability agendas.

Partnerships for the Future.

The unchallenged evolution of the 'scientific' evaluation ethos, matched with the growing political demands for economic efficiency, has elevated the traditional 'objectives' models of evaluation to unprecedented levels of perceived value. The methodological impotence and the political and ethical dilemmas of past and recent adaptations of democratically-oriented evaluation approaches expose the limited and diminishing impact of realistic evaluative alternatives. It may be argued that what this evaluative trend reveals is an educational community whose members, from sponsors and managers to students, accept that curriculum understanding and development can be achieved through a range of technological solutions provided by objectives-oriented and accountability-driven evaluation approaches. Such evaluations, for all practical purposes, negate the necessity for multiple perspectives to inform curriculum decision making.

Within the emerging complexities of 1990s higher education where pressures of changing government policies, changing social structures, changing technologies, and changing patterns of student and stakeholder demands dominate, there may be an opportunity for democratically-oriented evaluations to play a role in the development of partnerships for the future. Higher education institutions, now more that ever before, need to be better informed about the quality of their management and curriculum practices. As Reid (1996) argues:

Universities will flourish to the extent that their members (leaders, academic and administrative staff and students) appreciate and demonstrate the paramount value of high quality communication skills for every area of organisational activity... Leaders must have a knack of eliciting from within the academic community its own best ideas about future directions, interpreting and communicating those ideas in a way that draws people together in a shared commitment (Reid, 1996, p. 66).

For those who would advocate the democratic alternative to curriculum evaluation, such calls for enhanced communication and shared commitments are a signal to revise and rework methodological inadequacies and re-conceptualise ethical and political delimmas and offer all the participants of higher education a realistic democratically-oriented evaluative alternative: an alternative that would explore the value of all participants perspectives, the operationalisation of the curriculum and the multiple perspectives of curriculum issues. Such developments may present possibilities for
partnerships for the future that could encompass:
management and academic concerns
institutional and curriculum goals
external and internal stakeholder values
program outcome and activity aspirations
evaluation sponsor and participant issues
mainstream and alternative evaluative practices

The constitution of these partnerships is the intent of this research program. The focus over the next two years will be to ascertain the feasibility of developing a multi-perspective, democratically-oriented evaluative approach that will inform curriculum understandings and supplement institutional quality-measurement practices.

References


