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Critical Inquiry and Use as Action. The Expanding Scope of Evaluation Use

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A conception of evaluation as learning focuses attention on the *critical* inquiry cycle that incorporates use throughout the evaluation process.

Critical Inquiry and Use as Action

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The notion of evaluation as learning is not new. Over two decades ago, Lee Cronbach proposed just such a conceptualization. The first of his ninety-five theses on program evaluation states, "Program evaluation is a process by which society learns about itself" (Cronbach and Associates, 1980, p. 2, emphasis added). Learning is evident when it is applied and used by the program to "inform and improve the operations of the program" (p. 66). It is also evident when it "influence[s] social thought and action during the investigation or in the years immediately following" **(p.** 16). That evaluation should foster complex learning, applied and visible in action, is clear.

Cronbach and Associates (1980) also articulated, however, the recurring problem of use. Cronbach noted that "evaluation is not rendering the service it should" and that "commissioners of evaluation complain that the messages from evaluation are not useful, while evaluators complain that the messages are not used" (p. *3)*. If messages are neither useful nor used, learning is likely not occurring. How then can we conceptualize and enact evaluation in ways that foster learning and use? Cronbach is quite explicit, given this conceptualization, that the role of the evaluator is not solely that of external judge or assessor. His final thesis describes the evaluator as "an educator; his success is to be judged by what *others learn*" (p. 11, emphasis added).

In this chapter, we refocus and develop a constructivist view of evaluation as learning, arguing for a more complex and variegated understanding of use. We deepen and extend the work of Cronbach and of Weiss to elaborate the notion of evaluation serving an educative purpose. Consistent with this view, we suggest that the evaluator is a partner in the construction of knowledge and illustrate the critical inquiry process that fosters knowledge construction — that is, learning and concomitant use in

evaluation contexts. In addition, we suggest that the evaluator's primary partner is the program's leadership. By leadership, we mean those who have formal organizational responsibility for the conduct of the program; this could be one or a number of people.

In the ideal world, all stakeholders would be partners in this construction of knowledge. However, organizational realities suggest that such full democratic participation is often difficult to achieve. As Weiss (1998) has commented, staff leave or change jobs, and seldom are all members of a program able or willing to participate. Even more important, however, is that program leadership is responsible for decision making regarding structural changes and resource allocation. Leadership can also provide continuity, vision, and authority. Consequently, we argue that leadership is a particularly appropriate partner because it provides a crucial leverage point for improving program function and outcomes. Together the evaluator and program leadership engage in a process of learning in which use is action.

Evaluation as Learning

When we cast evaluation as learning, what do we mean by *learning*? What do people in programs do when they are learning? And what are the implications of this for how we enact evaluation? This section argues that learning is a cyclical process that involves apprehending the social world, reflecting on those perceptions to achieve new insights, and taking action based on those insights. In addition, learning is both individually and socially constructed, and appreciation of the various qualities of the program and dialogue between evaluator and program leadership enhance learning (see also Preskill and Torres, this volume).

Fundamentally, learning is a process through which an individual transforms data into information that can be used for a variety of purposes. People gather data (sensory building blocks such as numbers, sounds, words, movements) as naturally as they breathe. They filter these data through their own unique experiences and existing understandings and make judgments about the meaning of the data. Patterns emerge, and the data coalesce into information. When a person uses the information in some way (to act, to decide, to form a new idea), the product is knowledge, and learning has occurred.

Clearly, learning is an active process that involves concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). A learner receives input (data) and immerses herself in the data; she reflects on the data, forming patterns and making meaning; insights emerge. She then applies her insights and tries out new ideas or actions. The cycle begins again as she receives input anew on the new activities. Active use of information, then, is inherent in the learning cycle, for what is application if it is not use? This cycle captures the essence of *praxis*—action with reflection. Articulated by Freire (1970) and others (see, especially, hooks, 1994;

Vella, 1994), praxis is the integrated process of taking action and reflecting on that action in a safe yet challenging environment. Reflection on action—thinking about it and trying to work it out—leads to insight and hence to the desire and will to take new action. Learning, then, is a consequence of reflection, action, and reflection on action.

The learning process is facilitated by social interactions that enhance opportunities for perspective taking, reflection, and alternative interpretations (Presidential Task Force in Education of the American Psychological Association, 1993). Thus learning occurs as the individual interacts with the environment. As Caine and Caine (1997) articulate it, "Our brain/minds change in response to their engagement with others—so much so that individuals must always be seen to be integral parts of larger social systems. Indeed, part of our identity depends on establishing community and finding ways to belong. Learning, therefore, is profoundly influenced by the nature of the social relationships within which people find themselves" (pp. 104–105). Interacting with others in complex social systems, individuals are not only learners but also teachers of their colleagues (The 21st Century Learning Initiative, 1998).

The concept of the social quality of learning is further developed by Fischer and Granott (1995), who explore the notion of *ensembles* as creating supportive environments for optimal learning. They argue for an understanding of learning that moves beyond the assumption of learner as solo actor. "People typically work collaboratively in small ensembles to learn and solve problems together, even though they can act and think without anyone else directly present" (p. 306). Echoing the positions of Caine and Caine and the 21st Century Learning Initiative, Fischer and Granott argue that people tend to operate in a fundamentally social way, working together in ensembles by sharing a task or problem with collaborating partners.[1] They argue that together ensemble members learn and develop in different ways by constructing knowledge and solutions. "This social nature of learning and development is so fundamental that it is embedded within human families and societies" (p. 306). The concept of ensembles has implications for work teams in organizational contexts (see Preskill and Torres, 1999, and this volume) and offers insight into fruitful relationships for learning in evaluation contexts.

Engaging in dialogue, an interactive and authentic "thinking-together," is one such fruitful relationship and serves as an effective facilitator of complex learning. Bohm (1990) differentiates dialogue from discussion. *Discussion* comes from the Latin *discutere,* meaning to "dash to pieces" or to "examine by argument" (Brown, 1993, p. 689), which evokes notions of percussion and concussion—striking or hitting. In contrast, *dialogue* comes from the Greek *dialogos,* meaning "conversation, discourse, valuable or constructive communication" (p. 661). Dialogue is generative; it moves beyond any single individual's understanding to produce new knowledge (Senge, 1990). Thus program leadership and evaluator engage in dialogue about

what they are learning and move beyond either party's unitary understanding of the program.

Understanding evaluation as learning, as well as the concomitant use of evaluation-generated knowledge, suggests program growth and improvement. Program leadership and evaluator may engage in a process that in turn changes their perspectives: they learn from and with one another. Their dialogue guides decisions about data collection and analysis, which leads to richer understandings of program operations. This new understanding shapes decisions to support and improve the social value of the program. The better and more widely that the working of social programs is understood, the more rapidly policy will evolve and the more the programs will contribute to a better quality of life (Cronbach and Associates, 1980).

This perspective on evaluation as learning contrasts with the more instrumental problem-based approach, which is concerned for the most part with locating "problems"—the program's shortcomings to be fixed, the areas to be improved, what is not working well. The problem-driven approach examines program goals and looks for weaknesses in meeting those goals. This model assumes consensus on program goals and desired outcomes. The search is for instrumental solutions, for evidence to inform "correct" decisions. From the problem-based perspective, the evaluator assumes that both a problem and an appropriate solution exist. The evaluator is responsible for unearthing that problem and offering solutions (also known as recommendations). In these cases, use occurs when empirical evidence or conclusions help solve the problem (Weiss, 1978).

We suggest that the problem-based approach to evaluation is inherently limiting in that it deals with limited responses to given situations. In contrast, the learning approach seeks to raise questions, not address problems (for further discussion, see Preskill and Torres, 1999). "The function of thinking is not just solving an actual problem but discovering, envisaging, going deeper into questions" (Wertheimer, 1945, p. 123). The learning approach does not necessarily seek consensus; rather it actively searches for creative, divergent insights. "To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old questions from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science" (Einstein and Infeld, 1938, p. 92). The evaluation purpose of discovering "quality or qualities of the program" (Rallis and Rossman, 2000b), questioning what works and how it can work better, is consistent with an established approach to inquiry called *appreciative inquiry* (see Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Hammond and Royal, 1998; see also the URLs http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/ and http://www.serve.com/taos/appreciative.html).

Drawing on theories from action science and organizational development, appreciative inquiry has at its core a commitment to deep interrogation, to recasting what is working and how, and to focusing on strengths and opportunities. This approach does not focus on what is wrong; rather it focuses on what is working and seeks to nurture it. Hammond and Royal

(1998) describe appreciative inquiry as "appreciating and valuing the best of 'what is;' envisioning 'what might be;' dialoguing [about] 'what should be;' and innovating 'what will be'" (p. 12). This orientation to inquiry derives from different assumptions about society and change that shape concepts of use. These include, for example, the following:

- In every society, program, or group, something works.
- The act of asking questions of a program or group influences the program or group in some way.
- People have more confidence and willingness to change if they carry with them parts of the past, and the parts of the past to carry forward are those that are positive (Hammond, 1996).

These assumptions are consistent with the view that evaluation is learning and that learning is enhanced through collaborative dialogue that seeks to explicate merit and worth and explore possibilities. What is needed for the content of the dialogue is information that supports deep questioning and valuing rather than information calculated to point out the "correct" decision.

Historically, program evaluation sought to understand and appreciate quality. For example, program evaluation has been described as "the systematic investigation of the worth or merit of an object" (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994, p. 3). However, the enacted practice of evaluation has evolved into a frequently resented, often feared activity that is necessary for program survival. We seem to have forgotten Cronbach and Associates' thesis (1980) that evaluation is "better used to understand events and processes for the sake of guiding future activities" than for "looking back in order to assign praise or blame" (p. 4).

We propose that evaluation explore the *quality* of a program—that is, its degree of excellence (Brown, 1993), and its *qualities*—that is, its characteristics and attributes (Rallis and Rossman, 2000b). Quality considers the program's intrinsic merit or goodness as well as its worth, or how it is valued by others. Evaluations that seek to discover and explicate the quality and qualities of programs can serve to make a practical difference in the program because detailed descriptions of qualities provide a basis for making informed judgments about merit or worth (see also Stake's responsive evaluation, 1991). Detailed descriptions can foster dialogue about what is and what could be.

Use as Action

If we view evaluation as learning and see learning as a socially constructed, appreciative process, then evaluation use becomes reconceptualized as continual and collective knowledge generation and application. From this perspective, use by the "commissioners of evaluation" (Cronbach and

Associates, 1980, p. 3) is not a concern because use is integral to the learning process: use has not been split off from the processes of evaluative inquiry. In addition, because the evaluator and program leadership are colearners in the evaluation work, evaluation use is not the sole responsibility of the evaluator. There is a collective commitment to integrating new learning into program operations and outcomes. Program leadership, then, is at least as responsible as the evaluator for the discovery and use of information for program improvement. As Weiss notes, "The many failures of evaluation utilization cannot all be laid at the door of the evaluator and her inadequacies as researcher, communicator, or collaborator. The potential audiences for evaluation should be on their feet searching for good information and demanding the best possible data" (1998, p. 274).

Application of learning—use—may be expressed in various forms. Traditionally, evaluation information was intended to be used instrumentally: the information is applied to specific problems, offering solutions or recommendations. In the past two decades, enlightenment use has been recognized as a common outcome of evaluation studies: the information contributes to general knowledge, enhances understanding, or offers heuristic insight. Evaluation results may also serve symbolic purposes, suggesting new ways to represent phenomena or crystallizing beliefs and values. Finally, evaluation information may serve emancipatory purposes by offering ways to act that transform structures and practices for the better (see Rossman and Rallis, 1998, and Kirkhart, this volume, for frameworks of evaluation use).

But recall Cronbach's assertion, cited previously, that "the intent of evaluation is to influence social thought and action *during the investigation*" (Cronbach and Associates, 1980, p. 16, emphasis added). It is therefore not just the outcomes or results of information generated by evaluation that influence. Participation in an inquiry process that enhances learning is, by our definition, use (see also Patton, 1997). Collaborative evaluation and participatory evaluation have become accepted approaches to bringing the practitioner into the evaluation decision-making process and to fostering use of results (see, for example, Cousins and Earl, 1995). Weiss (1998), however, notes that although stakeholder involvement encourages stakeholder use, outside conditions often interfere with intended use. Empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman, 1996) and action research (Stringer, 1999) encourage practitioners to undertake their own studies of their own programs, but again Weiss (1998) cautions against "slipshod" (p. 273) data collection and analysis. Evaluation that holds as central the goal of learning and facilitates critical inquiry may lessen these problems because it alters the power structure implicit in the traditional evaluator–program leader relationship. Evaluation functions as part of the program; use is an intrinsic activity.

Developments over the past decades suggest that program leadership and participants have been split off from the evaluative function. For exam-

ple, the huge growth in the evaluation industry over the past thirty years (see Caracelli, this volume), driven in large part by the role of the federal government in requiring external evaluation of its programs, can be seen as marginalizing evaluation from the program and vesting those outside the program with responsibility and authority for its conduct. Similarly, the residue of positivist science's demand for objectivity and neutrality requires external assessment of program merit and worth. As a result, many program leaders believe that evaluation is someone else's domain; they should not tread there or risk being accused of bias or self-interested analysis. Furthermore because evaluation is not construed as part and parcel of the *everyday work*, there somehow is no time to accomplish it. We argue that evaluation needs to be reembedded into the responsibilities and functions of program leadership. We recognize that ideally multiple stakeholder groups should participate in evaluation; given the realities of program operations, however, engaging the participation of leadership is crucial (for elaboration, see Preskill and Torres, 1999). This may well be accomplished by conceptualizing evaluation as learning and building program leadership's capacity to conduct and support critical inquiry. Evaluators and program leaders who collaborate to discover new understandings that lead to program improvement engage in this process of critical inquiry.

Critical Inquiry

The learning process that we have described relies on a critical inquiry cycle, the foundation of knowledge generation. The process itself is a cycle of questioning, based on empirical data. Critical inquiry is an open process in which participants reflect on data and critique their analyses and interpretations of those data in light of substantive questions about the program. The process probes deep assumptions about program theory (Bickman, 1990; Chen, 1990) and implicit understandings of the relationship between program activities and outcomes. Social interaction enhances the process as dialogue. One powerful form of critical inquiry occurs when evaluators and program leaders engage in dialogue with one another, asking epistemological questions: What do we know about the program? What do we need to know? How will we learn it? What do we do with this knowledge?

The cycle begins with accepting the responsibility for the program and what happens or does not happen because the program is in place. This activity establishes ownership of the program: What are we choosing to do with our resources? What do we hope will happen because of this choice? How will participation in or implementation of this program help us achieve this vision? What will success look like? How will we know? The dialogue explores criteria for judging the quality of the program; it explicates the framework for judging the program's merit or worth. What do we value about the program?

Next, the cycle identifies a focus for the inquiry: What do we really want to know about this program? Do we have intriguing puzzles or troubling issues that we want or need to address? Is something happening that pleases us or bothers us? What do we do well already, and how do we know this? What do we do less well, and how do we know? The questions identified at this point will guide data collection as well as the meaning-making of the data.

The evaluator and program leaders are now ready to collect data to inform their questions. Some of the data already exist; some will come from new sources. They ask, What form will the data and evidence take? Where can we find it? How do we collect it? How will we organize it so that we can make sense of it? What values will the data represent? What data are missing? Whose voices are not present?

The next activity in the cycle is intense. The evaluator and program leaders conduct mindful analyses of the data in light of their articulated values, and they interpret the information in light of the program's purposes. In short, they question the data and assign meaning to them. Guided by the focus questions, they group the data, noting patterns and rules, articulating relationships, and categorizing. They are alert for unexpected outcomes and surprises. Here the dialogue serves to clarify, to correlate, and to judge. Who actually participates? What do program participants report is actually happening? What are they doing? Who is benefiting? According to whom? Is this program activity related to another? Did this activity influence this result? What is working and why? Are the activities congruent with our values?

The dialogue naturally shifts to action and change, to application and use. The shift is epistemological, moving from *knowing through talking* toward *knowing through action.* Up to this point, the dialogue has been symbolic or communicative, establishing new rules. According to Habermas (1979), social evolution depends on two principal activities through which humans shape the world and themselves: instrumental action satisfies material wants; symbolic and communicative action facilitates social integration. Institutional rules are developed through communicative action; they set the context through which instrumental action takes place. The dialectical interplay of these two forms is critical inquiry, and it yields social evolution (Bredo and Feinberg, 1982). These new rules set a new social context for instrumental action, so the dialogue moves to explore modifications or changes in the program: What practices should continue, and how can we strengthen them? What practices do we need to change? What supports and resources do we need to improve or alter our practices? The success or shortcomings of past practices have meaningful consequences. Based on the learnings from the first, more symbolic and communicative, phase of the dialogue, program leaders make decisions that will make a difference in future practices. And then the inquiry cycle begins anew. The evaluator and program leadership ask how they will learn about the new or modified program.

Illustrative Dialogues

The following dialogues from our work facilitating evaluation of inclusion efforts in schools illustrate the cycle.[2] Contracted by a state department of education, we met with principals and the special education director of Wallasquamet, a district that had extraordinarily high numbers of children identified with disabilities assigned to self-contained classrooms. Although the state's goal was to promote more inclusive education, the district refused to accept that goal; they simply wanted the state off their backs because they felt their programs were fine. Our first meeting deliberated on what an evaluation could do, the first stage in the inquiry cycle.

PAUL: You just don't understand our district. Nearly all the kids living here have major needs. It's pretty overwhelming if you look at it. We're doing the best we can. I mean, it's a wonder we don't have more kids in self-contained! And now the department is on our backs.

SHARON: What exactly do the kids need? Can you define those needs? It sounds like you all face more than ordinary demands.

TERESA: Well, kids in my school come from some pretty challenging backgrounds. A lot are "newcomers," you know, immigrants, refugees, and migrants, so their first problem is learning English. We can't just plop them into regular classrooms, because they are so far below grade level.

DONNA (special education director): I think I need to clarify that. It's not that all newcomers are put in special ed. We have separate ESL classes they go into.

GRETCHEN: And do they stay in those classes for the whole year?

DONNA: It depends. Sometimes we just don't have any room for them anywhere else. And then even when they are proficient enough to enter regular classes, many are still below grade level. You know, it just makes matters worse when the department comes down on us.

GRETCHEN: So your problems are not all in special ed? What are your other needs?

LILIA: A ton! In my school, a lot of kids are from foster homes, so they have moved a lot and missed a lot of school. That puts them below grade level, way below grade level. They need a *lot* of attention, far more than a regular classroom teacher can give.

PAUL: Let's not forget behavior. Because their home lives are so disrupted, these kids have trouble getting through a school day without some incident. Again, more attention.

GRETCHEN: You've just identified at least three issues beyond typical learning disabilities—language and cultural adjustment, mobility, behavior—behind the self-contained placement. Do you really believe that self-contained is the best way to deliver the services they need?

DONNA: We know the department wants more inclusion classes, but it just won't work here.

MIKE: Well, actually, I have four inclusion classes. They don't show up on the census because the special ed kids in those classes have self-contained IEPs. I think Silvia has the same thing in her school. It's not so bad, you know, not as bad as the department thinks.

SHARON: So the label "self-contained" does not necessarily mean traditional self-contained? Maybe we need to describe what you are actually doing. Right now, it sounds like a lot of things are happening, some good, some possibly not so good. You may be meeting some kids' needs quite well, and some others may be falling through the cracks. Let's ask, What do these service delivery structures look like? How are they serving students? How will we know if they are being served well?

SILVIA: I expected the same-old same-old thing from this meeting. We all want the best for the kids, but it is always, "do this, do that," with no consideration of what is. Now are you saying that you'll help us define what we have, so we can see what is working? I don't mind that.

PAUL: I might like that. I know some kids in Meadowlands are falling through, but keeping track is nearly impossible. Do you have any ideas?

Our next dialogue was about data collection, the second stage in the inquiry cycle. We identified multiple sources, including several that already existed. We proposed data collection from sources (such as parents and students) that had not been tapped before. The principals recognized that one stakeholder who was not present was the department of education, so they asked what evidence the state would accept to understand the district's efforts. Eventually, descriptions were developed of the various special education service delivery programs in each school.

The group spent several sessions critiquing the descriptions. This is the crucial stage that moves beyond appreciation to evaluation. Participants passed judgment and probed some assumptions of program activities. The dialogue questioned the benefits in each structure: What is

working? Why? What is not working? Why not? Who is benefiting? Which students? Which adults? At anyone else's expense? The following is an example.

SHARON: I was pretty impressed, Mike, with what you do, given how overcrowded you are in Hillside. You don't really have any self-contained classrooms. Identified kids are all receiving services in the inclusive classes. When one needs some extra attention, the certified special ed teacher in the room takes the child aside.

GRETCHEN: And sometimes the child is not even one with identified needs. So the regular ed kids benefit as well.

MIKE: Still, we do have that one boy who really disrupts things. You saw what happened. He really needs the traditional self-contained, but we don't have one to put him in. Can't we create more flexibility? What's keeping us from doing that?

SHARON: It does look like few opportunities exist for kids to move into anther program when their needs change. Children seem to get stuck in their initial assignment.

SILVIA: I see that some of my self-contained kids are ready to move into inclusion classes, but I only have classes where kids are integrated for things like gym and art. That won't do. We need access to a real continuum of services for kids.

GRETCHEN: I wonder if some alternative approach could work, some way to create the flexibility you need.

MIKE: Hillside is not that far from you, Silvia. Could we cluster or something like that? Maybe work out some kind of exchange.

And so change begins in the schools, the final stage before the cycle starts again. These excerpts from the evaluation process serve to illustrate how dialogue moved from exploration and critique to action. Together the evaluators and program leaders (principals and director) learned about the programs they offered and took action to improve service delivery. Their critical inquiry process also reminded them that they had overlooked several voices and reminded them of the imperfection of any plan, so they scheduled times to continue their dialogue and discussed ways to make their inquiry ongoing.

The use of the cycle by evaluators and program leaders generates knowledge. What makes the cycle critical is the application of information for improving the human condition. Action—use—is integral throughout

the cycle; the dialogue produces knowledge in the context of application. The imperative for use is present from the beginning. "Knowledge is always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation and it will not be produced until and unless the interests of the various actors are included" (Gibbons and others, 1994, p. 4). The process itself, then, is use. Rather than construing use as something that happens later or only in an intentional way, we argue that use is inherent in the inquiry process itself. The critical inquiry is social change.

The critical perspective reflects a shift from an emphasis on the economic and political features of social life toward an emphasis on the cultural and ideological features. Knowledge is seen in the context of its contribution to social evolution, specifically in terms of progressive material and symbolic emancipation (Bredo and Feinberg, 1982). Critical inquiry cannot focus only on instrumental action; it pushes communicative action. Critical inquiry, then, starts with action and results in action.

Social evolution, from the critical inquiry perspective, means forward change. Derived from nuclear physics, as in critical mass, and similar to Piaget's notion of the organic process of disequilibration, the critical inquiry process amasses data from the empirical world and engages in ongoing analysis of these data. Analysis results in the reorganization of categories and thus in emergent, new meanings. Partners move from a false stability (understanding) through disequilibrium to a more grounded state (knowledge). The new understandings produce action, which in turn serves as input for the next cycle.

Action emerges from the exploration and consideration of alternatives, grounded in a social justice framework. Critical questions seek to discover and achieve a more just program. They involve issues of power; and race, class, and gender are crucial for understanding experience. The process is visible, authored by a raced, gendered, classed, and politically oriented individual. The voices of silenced and oppressed participants are recognized and heard. Typical social justice questions ask, Who is controlling choices and opportunities? Whose interests are or are not being served?

Evaluator as Partner and Coproducer of Knowledge

The knowledge production of ongoing critical inquiry takes the burden of use off the evaluator's shoulders. It becomes a joint responsibility of both the evaluator and program leadership (for a contrasting position, see Kirkhart, this volume). For evaluation to be a genuine learning experience for program improvement, "Both evaluators and [program leaders] have to bring something to the table, too, their own covered dish to the collective party. Evaluators have to bring not only their research skills but their responsiveness to practitioners' questions and perspectives and their communication ability. Practitioners have to provide their first-hand awareness

of the issues involved and—above all—the will and determination to change what is wrong" (Weiss, 1998, p. 273).

The evaluator's role, then, is as partner and coproducer of knowledge. The critical inquiry process is a shared heuristic, a discovery process. The partnership encourages dialogue, discovery, analysis for change, and small-scale experimentation. The evaluator serves as a teacher, a resource, a facilitator throughout the cycle, becoming an "old friend" (Rallis, 1988). Like a truly effective teacher, the evaluator offers a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) that reveals alternative perspectives and possibilities. In the past, we have labeled this role the *critical friend* (Rallis and Rossman, 2000a, 2000b). The partners explore critical—that is, essential—questions, those that explore the heart of the issue and recognize the tentative and speculative nature of any answer. The critical friendship coalesces around a common purpose, evaluating and improving the program. Both partners are essential to questioning assumptions, collecting data, making meaning, generating alternatives, and finally, to using information to foster more equitable and socially just programs.

Notes

1. The 21st Century Learning Initiative was established in 1995 to "make sense of research on learning and learning processes that were fragmented in many different disciplines, and embedded in many different universities, research institutions and businesses around the world. The 21st Century Learning Initiative's essential purpose is to facilitate the emergence of new approaches to learning that draw upon a range of insights into the human brain, the functioning of human societies, and learning as a self-organizing activity. We believe this will release human potential in ways that nurture and form local democratic communities worldwide, and will help reclaim and sustain a world supportive of human endeavor" (21st Century Learning Initiative, 2000).

2. Our intent is not to provide a how-to manual for conducting critical inquiry dialogue. We recognize the challenges and requisite preconditions (see Greene, 2000, for a discussion and illustration). In the example we provide here, we note that we have worked in this setting long before this particular issue surfaced.

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