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# Dialogue for Learning: Evaluator as a Critical Friend

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# 7

If the purpose of evaluation is learning, dialogue can be an *effective* means for achieving *this* purpose. This chapter focuses on the crucial role of language in establishing the heuristic stance that fosters dialogic inquiry and thereby enhances the *effectiveness* of evaluation. The *rule* of the evaluator in facilitating dialogue is explicated through examples from practice.

## Dialogue for Learning: Evaluator as Critical Friend

Sharon F. Rallis, Gretchen B. Rossman

Traditionally, evaluation has served as a technical task by instrumentally informing decisions at the program or organization level, adding to accumulated understandings of policymakers, and legitimizing politically driven actions (Weiss, 1998). In this chapter, we argue that, in the twenty-first century, one genre of evaluation can take on a different and greater role through a commitment to social justice and that the fundamental purpose of evaluation in this genre is learning. Learning in a postmodern era requires dialogue; language can either enable or discourage dialogue. This chapter contributes to an alternative view of evaluation as learning for social justice. We illustrate the use of dialogue and the power of language in learning through examples drawn from practice.

In this genre, evaluation aims to serve the deep ethical purposes of a social program or an organization to influence the fair and equitable distribution of social goods and to foster a more civil society. In a 1991 review of evaluation and social justice, Ernie House wrote:

During the past twenty-five years of institutionalized evaluation, we have moved from a conception of justice in which it was assumed that increasing the economic production of the nation and the outcome measures of a program would benefit everyone alike to a conception of justice in which we see that social programs may have different **effects** for different people and groups. During this time injustices regarding race, gender, and ethnicity have been recognized by evaluators though not always remedied. . . . [S]hould evaluators represent within their evaluations the interests and needs of those unjustly ignored . . . and give weight to those interests? I believe [that] position is

morally correct and will be seen so historically. Evaluators cannot be value neutral in these matters. Our conceptions and even our methodologies are value laden [House, 1991, p. 245].

Evaluators in the postmodern world accept that values are present in evaluation. In reminding us that evaluation is not merely a determination of goal attainment, Scriven (1993) argues that absolute values (those that transcend practical concerns) operate in any ethical evaluation, and that “it is truly unethical to leave ethics out of program evaluation” (p. 30). Greene argues that “advocacy” or an explicit value commitment, is an “inevitable part of evaluative inquiry” (1997, p. 26) because claims to knowledge are grounded in the inquirer’s own perceptual frame which is comprised of his or her unique experiences, interests, theoretical understandings, value, and beliefs.

The gods of objectivity and impartiality are challenged by a more democratic pluralism. Evaluation approaches or methodologies have adapted to include multiple perspectives and to articulate operating assumptions and ideals (Patton, 1997). As Greene says, the borders between the act of evaluation and the program being evaluated should be opened up:

In this way, evaluation and program can work in concert to help democratize the conversation about equitable health care for the elderly, about generational and spatial destitution, about kids killing kids, about a safe and adequate food supply [Greene, 1997, p. 29].

The democratic pluralist approaches are not relativistic; they are realistic. Rather than represent only the voices of power, they include the voices of those affected or of those likely to be affected by the program. They not only recognize the political dimension of evaluation; they interact with the body politic. They are democratic in essence and more participatory and collaborative than traditional approaches to evaluation.

Given these arguments about evaluation and its development in the recent past, we suggest that the fundamental purpose of evaluation can be *learning*. Where that is the purpose, a thoughtful, ethically conducted evaluation generates information that may lead to shifts in understanding of various stakeholders. These new understandings can be used to improve, strengthen, and/or alter aspects of the program. Stakeholders might be funding agencies, government agencies (at several levels), clients and potential clients of the program, as well as those who administer and implement the program. Learning should be evident at multiple layers in the program and among key stakeholder groups. This focus on *evaluation as learning* represents one conception of evaluation and its use, consistent with the ideas discussed above. This conception shifts our attention to what happens during the evaluative process and at its conclusion and offers new roles for the evaluator.

If learning within and next to the program is the ultimate goal of evaluation, dialogue is essential. Bohm (1990) differentiates dialogue from dis-

cussion. The root of discussion is *discutere* with a primary meaning of “dash to pieces, disperse, drive away, dispel, shake off, set free” and a secondary meaning of “examine by argument, debate, talk about *with* another person” (Brown, 1993, p. 689, emphasis in original). The primary meaning evokes the notions of percussion and concussion, suggesting striking or hitting with a connotation of finality. Dialogue, on the other hand, comes from the Greek *dialogos* meaning “conversation, discourse, valuable or constructive communication” (Brown, 1993, p. 661). Dialogue, therefore, is a fundamentally interactive process of authentic thinking together. It is generative. It moves beyond any single individual’s understanding to produce new knowledge (Senge, 1990). And it entails a sustained democratic relationship between people—program people and the evaluator.

Why is this relationship so important? In an ideal world, individuals would be reflective and critical of their work, and programs would engage in self-sustaining and developmental learning—they would be *inquiry-minded organizations* (Rallis and MacMullan, forthcoming). Through ongoing monitoring and assessment, conscious and intentional (mindful) reflection, and internal dialogue, the program or organization would identify strengths and weaknesses. As a whole, it would implement appropriate mid-course corrections to address areas of weakness and would be continually on the lookout for blind spots and emergent problems. In this ideal world, external evaluators would not be needed because the culture of the program or organization would demand that all personnel engage in evaluating their goals and activities as a matter of course. Such programs are evaluation-minded.

The full-time inquiry-minded program, however, is rare, and people—not organizations—use evaluation information (Patton, 1997, p. 43). Neither time nor structures exist for dealing with an entire organization, nor can there be assurance that such large-scale interaction or commitment is possible. People—not organizations—turn data into information for its use as knowledge. It is the personal relationship between people that facilitates information use for learning. Through dialogic inquiry, the evaluators help generate the data and encourage the interpretations that foster learning. They help surface troubling questions, hidden data, alternative explanations. They can help program personnel see that the emperor may in fact have no clothes on.

To be heard, however, the evaluator must be more than noise in the system. Rather, she is someone the emperor knows and can listen to. She is more friend than judge, although she is not afraid to offer judgments. She does not fit the traditional image of the evaluator as one who determines the fate of a program. Instead, she is integral to program development. She helps the program people uncover and articulate the program’s theories of practice (Argyris and Schön, 1978) and to consider the efficacy of those theories.

At the same time, the emperor has to be willing to attend and listen. If key program individuals are not open to making their assumptions explicit, to examining the data thoughtfully and with open minds, to critiquing existing

patterns and interpretations, to considering alternative perspectives, to exploring and proposing new practices, the relationship will go nowhere. The evaluation will not be used. In the relationship fostered by a conception of evaluation as learning, however, program people are able to listen. The evaluator and the program people become *critical friends*.

### **Evaluation as Dialogic Inquiry**

Partners in the critical friends relationship share a mind-set and commitment that differentiate them from traditional evaluators and enable them to engage in productive dialogue. Their stance is heuristic and critical; their interactions are reciprocal; their shared commitment is toward a more ethical world based on principles of social justice. These stances establish the preconditions for dialogic inquiry.

First, the critical friends take a *heuristic stance*—one that is open to discovery. They realize that knowledge is iterative; it builds on itself. One discovery leads to further discoveries. They seek meaning more than a single truth. Dialogic inquiry is grounded in the epistemologic assumption that truth—or knowledge—is not a given; it is constructed through the learning of individuals and groups. It therefore requires that participants be open to the discovery of multiple meanings.

Heuristic, from the Greek for *discover*, also implies personal insight and tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1966). Tacit knowing, or intuition, is deep inner understanding; it is unarticulated knowledge that derives from experience. Out of this knowing come the hunches that often drive evaluative questions and insights. The critical friends accept the value of tacit knowing; their goal is its articulation.

Critical friends also take a *critical stance*, one that is willing to question the status quo and demand data to guide ethical decisions about change. The word *critic*, from the Latin for one who is decisive and the Greek for one who is able to discern or to separate, implies an individual who can separate out and judge the merits and faults of an object, activity, event, work, or person. The critical stance seeks both positive and negative feedback for the purpose of improving the whole. The term *critical* also means materials and conditions that are essential to a project or person at a given point. Thus, from a critical stance, the evaluator and program people raise questions that are essential, that explore the heart of the issue, and that recognize the tentative and speculative nature of any answers.

The critical stance also means that those in the relationship are willing to explore alternative perspectives. The critical stance of the partners allows their choices for action to emerge from collaboratively discovered meanings, rather than from a separately defined and external truth. Critical questions are grounded in a social justice framework and seek to discover a more just way of being. A typical social justice question asks: Whose interests are or are not being served by this program? From the critical stance, the evalua-

tor and program people listen for voices that have been marginalized and silenced. They welcome and use contradictions and diverse viewpoints.

A critical stance also means transition and action. Just as one discovery yields to another, new perspectives demand new actions. As in chemistry, math, or physics, a critical mass or point is that condition or place at which an abrupt change occurs; in developmental psychology, Piaget's notion of organic process identifies a disequilibrium phase that tips the balance from one stage of development to the next. Similarly, a critical stance encourages the reorganization of categories and working theories and, thus, the emergence of new meanings. The partners move through a dialectic process from one equilibrium through critical mass and disequilibrium to a new, more stable state. Their critical stance supports and encourages change.

Moreover, the relationship is *equitable and reciprocal*. It is equitable in that the traditional power relationship between evaluator and evaluand are consciously and deliberately blurred. All parties assume responsibility for the agenda, decisions, and actions. Critical friends recognize and value the unique contributions of the other and understand that true dialogue entails give and take. They come together for a common purpose, and they develop shared meanings about where the program is, the value of its status, and where it should go. They determine actions according to their new understandings.

Several contextual conditions encourage dialogue. One crucial ingredient is *mutual ownership* of the process and results. The extent to which program people and key stakeholders are involved in and committed to the evaluation will foster use of the results—their own learning. A second condition is that the *program values* permeate the evaluation. As an example, a participatory literacy project would be ill served by an evaluation that did not track the personal and programmatic changes resulting from engagement in a participatory process. A third condition is that the program people and the evaluator are *mutually respectful*—understanding the complexities of each other's roles and viewing each other as colleagues (Senge, 1990). A fourth condition is that those engaged in the dialogue are willing to *suspend their assumptions* (Senge, 1990; Bohm, 1990). This means that they are willing to surface extant, often-hidden assumptions, articulate them, and examine them for their verisimilitude and coherence. Finally, the evaluator should be *committed* to the broad goals of the program and to seek its greater effectiveness in achieving those goals.

### **The Power of Language**

Ownership, sensitivity to program values, respectfulness, willingness to examine assumptions, and commitment to program goals are not mere abstractions. Each is enacted in myriad ways as the evaluator and program people and other stakeholders come together and negotiate the meaning of their mutual activity. We argue that it is the language used in and about the evaluation process that enables dialogue. First, without language there is no

dialogue. Second, language distinguishes between discussion and dialogue. For example, discussion relies on a language of authority; its finality cuts off the possibility of the interaction that is dialogue. Dialogue, rather, relies on facilitative language, what we have come to call the language of the critical friend. Thus, the language used in these encounters powerfully shapes perceptions and opens up the possibility of learning.

Recent research on learning (Caine and Caine, 1997) asserts that the mind “learns optimally—it makes maximum connections—when appropriately challenged in an environment which encourages taking risks” (p. 107). Commitment, trust, and concern about deeper values help create environments that are safe, ones in which people can be open to new ideas or different perspectives. Such an environment encourages the examination of hidden assumptions and deep values. Alternatively, the mind “downshifts” when it perceives threat (Caine and Caine, 1994, 1997). Perceived threats come in many guises: fear of undue criticism, fear of the unknown, fear of misinterpretation, among others. Thus, to foster evaluation use—learning—the evaluator must focus on involvement and trust, creating learning environments that are challenging without being overwhelming. By the same token, the evaluator must actively avoid creating situations in which program people feel threatened. When they do, their minds shut down and learning cannot occur. We argue that the traditional *language of authority* used by many evaluators and expressed directly in written reports can contribute to defensiveness on the part of potential users and to their shutting down their minds, deflecting the “findings,” and . . . filing the report away. When one examines these texts, the language is distanced and distancing, disembodied, and authoritative. The voice of the evaluator in these texts claims to know more about program functioning and results than those involved in the program. In contrast, the *language of the critical friend* is expressed more frequently in dialogue with program participants and key stakeholders. It is thus communicative, personalized, and grounded in program values and ideology. When written, this language communicates shared knowledge.

What does the language of the critical friend do? It enacts dialogue. The dialogue allows mutual identification of what is important—agreement on what is the problem. For example, rather than an authoritative statement, “The program identifies too many students,” the critical friend might say, “How are we meeting all of our children’s needs?” Dialogue also encourages corroboration and elaboration (Rossman and Wilson, 1994) of explicit insights as well as festering worries. Dialogue can confirm hunches and probe for more detail, pursuing the line of inquiry that “there’s more going on here.” Next, dialogue can gauge expectations, ensuring that program personnel are realistic about what they expect to accomplish. Finally, dialogue leads to new areas for inquiry. It supports inspiration, initiation, and reconceptualization (Rossman and Wilson, 1994), resulting in a more complex picture.

In the following sections, we depict the language of authority and the language of the critical friend. The language of authority is presented in tra-

ditional format—a written report—followed by our analysis and commentary. The language of the critical friend is presented through a specific literary device—the dialogue surrounding the evaluation is set in columns. In the left-hand column is dialogue between the evaluator and key stakeholders (in italics); in the right-hand column is our explanation of that communication. We begin with the language of authority to set the scene for the alternative, dialogic language of the critical friend. For both examples, we draw on an evaluation that we conducted of an inclusion effort in a large city school system. The evaluation design included week-long observations in each of ten schools, interviews with principals and selected teachers, a survey of regular and special education teachers, review of relevant documents, as well as lengthy conversations with key stakeholders. We specifically chose this example because it is not extremely authoritative but still subject to the critical friend critique. The reader will note that the language of authority is exclusively text-based—excerpts from an evaluation report—while the language of the critical friend is presented in dialogue form (based on real conversations), drawing on excerpts from the same report. These excerpts are presented orally and in the context of a relationship.

### The Language of Authority

#### Evaluation of the New Birmingham Schools Inclusion Initiative, Final Report

Principal leadership is crucial for the successful practices of inclusion in the eight sample schools. In those schools that exhibit promising inclusionary practices, the principals espoused clear and strong visions and enacted processes to see that these visions were implemented. The principals offered facilitation and support in various forms to faculty and staff in their complex dealings with students. For example, one principal brought in a university partner to lead inclusion teachers in discussions about modifying curriculum. Another principal consolidated his para-professionals for use in inclusive classrooms.

At the same time, many of the organizational structures and policies of the New Birmingham Public Schools appeared driven by bureaucratic considerations rather than educational ones. In every school, structures and processes exist that support or impede inclusion. These include: class size; student placement; staffing patterns; and programmatic options.

First and foremost, successful inclusion requires small classes with 15–18 students, depending on the needs of the students included. Ideally, these classrooms are staffed by two adults, either two certified adults in a co-teaching arrangement or one certified professional with one para-professional. The standard student:teacher ratio of 28 :1, set by NBPS policy and supported by board budget, forced principals to seek external resources or to creatively allocate existing resources to reduce class size. Even those schools with smaller class sizes built into the model (as at Oliver) appeared to need further adult sup-



port. It is unreasonable to expect that one adult alone in a classroom with as many as twenty students can effectively respond to and meet the diverse learning and behavioral needs that are present in an inclusive classroom.

District policies for placing students in classes also appeared counter-productive to inclusion efforts.

While the report is generally helpful and supportive and provides details, it does not reveal that the program people were involved in generating data or that they collaborated in constructing the resulting claims. The tone shows respect on the part of the evaluator/author for the program; we have no direct evidence from the text that program people also respect the views of the evaluator and hence are likely to use this report. The report stands on its own, with no apparent supporting dialogue that would foster creative, thoughtful use. The report identifies strengths and weaknesses in this inclusion initiative, but it does not depict moments of deep insight that could result in new directions for program goals and activities.

Many of these same “findings” are presented in Table 7.1, in the dialogue between the evaluator as critical friend and program personnel—in this case, school principals. The context of the relationship supports the potential for sustained, thoughtful use. The role of the evaluator, moreover, is that of facilitator and constructive critic.

The dialogue is not always comfortable, and the language is not judgment free. In fact, judgments play an important role in understanding the program and in challenging basic assumptions that program staff hold about program theory and operation. Judgments also surface discrepancies between espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris and Schön, 1978). They can pose the larger, often quite difficult, issues raised at the beginning of this chapter about social justice and those marginalized, even excluded, from the dialogue.

Because evaluation may deal with deeply held issues, this dialogic approach is not always possible. For example, we can imagine an evaluator adopting the formal language of the critical friend without the underlying respect for program values and personnel. In such a scenario, the language may become rote and potentially manipulative rather than genuine and facilitative. In another scenario, an evaluation may be mandated; program staff may be highly resistant to change, or deep divisions may exist. In this second situation, the resulting tension may undercut the mutual respect needed for dialogue to occur.

When effectively implemented, however, dialogue introduces an action-research cycle not dissimilar to the Argyris and Schön double-loop learning stages (1978) or stages identified for critical collegiality (Lord, 1994, in Armstrong, 1998). This cycle includes, first, assessment—taking the pulse of the program and its practices; identifying puzzles and surprises, both positive and negative; and clarifying problems related to practices. Second, it

**Table 7.1. The Language of the Critical Friend: Meeting of New Birmingham Schools Principals with Evaluator**

E: evaluator; P1: principal 1; P2: principal 2; P3: principal 3

E: *I am pleased that you all could meet with me today. You'll recall that the last time we met, we reviewed data on leadership. Based on the interview results, we agreed that not only is this an important area, but it may be one where the New Birmingham Schools excel. But we also agreed that you are having some problems with inclusion efforts. A couple of you felt there are a lot of things you have no control over—no matter how good your leadership skills. So you asked me to look at some organizational factors.*

Here the evaluator names the problem, together with program people. Note the use of *we*.

P1: *My faculty was glad to see you around again. A few even commented that they felt they learned a lot from the focus group you ran.*

The evaluator is responsive to program needs. The principals' "asking" the evaluator to pursue certain lines of inquiry shows ownership on their parts.

E: *Good. I want to thank you again for facilitating my meeting with the school folk. Three of the schools decided that focus groups were the best way to collect useful data. In the others, we set up individual, and in a few cases, team appointments. They all felt I needed to observe classes for myself. But they agreed to collect the achievement data on students.*

Note also the mutual decision making about the role of the evaluator. Also note the involvement of the principals as key data gatherers, indicating their commitment and ownership of both process and results.

P2: *I get the feeling that you surfaced some problems—at least in my school. What are we doing wrong?*

E: *I did hear—and see—some things that I think are barriers to successful inclusion—but I'm not sure you are **doing** something wrong. Rather, it may be that you cannot do some things **right** because of some of the system's structures and policies.*

This language signals respect, avoids assigning blame to program people, and establishes realistic expectations. It asks the principals to suspend their assumptions about their own behaviors.

P1: *What do you mean?*

Mutual respect is evident here. The evaluator begins with positive, supportive language.

E: *First and foremost, it is clear from the interviews and observations that, with few exceptions, your staff are committed to meeting the needs of all the children in their classes. Nevertheless, they make it clear that successful inclusion requires small classes—fifteen to eighteen students, depending on the needs of the students included. And, ideally, classrooms need to*

Here the evaluator offers a tentative insight for corroboration (or not) by the principals.

**Table 7.1. The Language of the Critical Friend: Meeting of New Birmingham Schools Principals with Evaluator (cont'd)**

<p><i>be staffed by two or more adults. Teachers tell me that sometimes two certified professionals coteaching works well; others say there are times when a certified professional only needs a paraprofessional in the room full time. Even in Oliver, which was designed to have small classes, the teacher needs the support of another adult in the classroom. The consensus is that one adult alone in a room with as many as twenty students just can't effectively respond to—and meet—the diverse learning and behavioral needs that are present in a truly inclusive classroom.</i></p>	<p>The evaluator understands and is committed to the program's underlying values. Teachers are acknowledged here as important sources of data and insight. The program's values of serving all children permeates the evaluator's language. This helps set realistic expectations and implies a suspension of assumptions.</p>
<p><i>P3: No kidding. That's why I spend so much of my time seeking external resources to fund the paras in my school.</i></p>	<p>The evaluator is not making judgments at this point, but reporting what she has seen and heard.</p>
<p><i>P2: And I've come up with ways to allocate my Title I and bilingual funds to reduce class sizes.</i></p>	<p>The dialogue continues to define and clarify the problem.</p>
<p><i>E: I know you do—and so do the teachers. They appreciate your efforts—that's more evidence of your leadership skills. Anyway, I've some strong statements from teachers about the need for reduced class size and adult support in inclusive classrooms. Also, the teachers at each school compiled the configurations of size, support, identified needs, and behavioral and learning needs for their classrooms. You can see that students in the smaller classes have more time on task and exhibit fewer disruptions. You might want to look at grades and scores in those classes to see how the kids are learning.</i></p>	<p>This illustrates mutual respect and further acknowledges the voice of the teachers in the dialogue.</p>
<p><i>P2: We should look at outcomes, and grades as one indicator of outcomes. We have the scores, and I can compile grades for each class. Right now, we are just assuming that the children in the smaller classes are learning what they should—I'd like some evidence that they are. After all, the whole purpose of inclusion is to improve all students' learning.</i></p>	<p>Teachers are directly involved in the evaluation rather than having it "done to them."</p>
<p><i>E: Now, another concern is student placement. Teachers and staff regaled me with instances of students sent to them because "there is a seat," not because the appropriate program or services are available.</i></p>	<p>Here the dialogue initiates a new idea for consideration.</p> <p>The principal develops the idea.</p> <p>Program values are paramount here. The evaluator corroborates and elaborates on concerns and "worries" of program people, thereby validating their perspectives. There is evidence of deep respect here.</p>

**Table 7.1. The Language of the Critical Friend: Meeting of New Birmingham Schools Principals with Evaluator (cont'd)**

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<p>Teachers report frustration when they don't feel professionally prepared to meet the severity of a student's needs.</p>	<p>Principal corroborates deep learning and assumes responsibility for program limitations . . .</p>
<p>P1: We know that happens—because of certain labeling policies. I'm a victim of those policies too. Like when Central Office sent that full "Lab" program to my building in September—no time to prepare.</p>	<p>. . . and solutions.</p>
<p>[discussion continues with reference to staffing and programming]</p>	<p>Realistic concerns can surface here as problems for the group to solve.</p>
<p>P3: I think we have some pretty powerful findings—ones that need to be addressed before inclusion can be completely successful. But any recommendations to follow what we've learned are likely to require more money. Just dropping a report of this information on the superintendent and board risks it being buried or filed with no action.</p>	<p>New possibilities for understanding the larger district context are presented for the group to consider.</p>
<p>E: This evaluation documents your needs. It is possible the board hasn't ever seen this information. And Dr. Painter may be unwilling to ask the board for money for more staff or paraprofessionals without evidence of substantial needs. Let's talk about how we can use the documentation to bring about some improvement.</p>	<p>Possible actions are identified here.</p>
<p>P2: Let's take the James, my school. You've got the data that demonstrates the difference in math achievement after we lost Title I funds for that remedial math teacher last year. The Board might be persuaded to support her whether we have federal bucks or not!</p>	<p>New directions and creative solutions are put forward.</p>
<p>P3: You only use her half time, don't you? The intermediate grade math scores in my school are pretty low—could we present a case for splitting her between our schools?</p>	<p></p>

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includes conscious mutual reflection on the program and practices, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation; third, judgment and reframing or reconceptualizing the program or practice; and fourth, taking action—developing and implementing new program directions or new practices. As the examples demonstrate, language helps establish the environment of trust, risk-taking, and respect that are crucial for the deep learning that is the fundamental purpose of this dialogic genre of evaluation.

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