**Evaluation in Victorian Literature**

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Abstract:

Evaluators are committed to ensuring quality through adherence to various formal evaluation standards, which have evolved from social science disciplines. In contrast, what might humanities and understanding informal evaluations contribute to evaluation theory, practice and quality? This presentation examines evaluations portrayed in Victorian literature to identify informal approaches to establishing credibility. Through analyses of books by Dickens, Hardy, Chopin and others, we learned that some literary characters’ criteria and decision methods lead to problematic evaluations that serve as foils for promoting the choices of other characters. These classic stories invite readers to learn from characters’ evaluation experiences and improve their own informal evaluations. In this presentation we share literary examples that lead us to conclude that understanding informal evaluation lessons taught through literature could help formal evaluators extend stakeholders’ positive informal evaluations, while countering their poor informal evaluation choices, thus improving formal evaluation quality through better informal evaluations.

Summary:

The discipline of evaluation is committed to raising formal evaluation quality through adherence to various standards such as accuracy, propriety, feasibility, and utility (Sanders, 1994) and Guiding Principles (Shadish, 1995). Alkin (2004) notes formal standards and various approaches to meet them have evolved mostly through the work of social scientists.

Schwandt (2002) reviewed principles associated with these trends in formal evaluation, critiqued what he considers as an over-emphasis on social science, and suggested that more attention ought to be given to what the humanities might teach evaluators about their work.

In an attempt to expand evaluation’s scope and respond to Schwandt’s critique, we studied several Victorian novels to examine how authors use their art to reveal evaluation issues manifested in various human interaction situations. We explored how these authors’ ideas might influence readers’ informal and self-evaluation habits and could be used to enhance the practice of formal evaluation: Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, V. S. Naipaul, Arthur Miller, Robert Coles, George McDonald, Henry David Thoreau, M. Joseph Bedier, Jane Austin, Willa Cather, Victor Hugo, George Eliot, Chopin, and others.

Using a framework for categorizing traditional formal evaluation components and issues (Williams, 2008) such as context, stakeholders and their values, evaluands, criteria or standards, evaluation questions, etc., we mapped literary examples of informal evaluations from these authors to these evaluation principles. We found that through developing characters, showing them conducting informal evaluations, and inviting readers to also evaluate themselves while learning about and judging their characters, most authors provide much for evaluation theorists and practitioners to consider as they work to raise the quality of formal evaluations.

For example, in *The Life and Adventures Of Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens uses characters’ actions and statements to contrast high and low quality evaluations made by these characters, and thus invites readers to reflect on their own evaluations of themselves and others. Early in the book, the family of schoolmaster Squeers inappropriately judges students, parents, themselves, and Nicholas. In contrast, Nicholas slowly grows up and improves in making realistic and thoughtful evaluations of others and himself. Dickens’ preface suggests he wrote the book to invite readers to consider how similar they are to the characters and to learn from their evaluations. He presented Mr. Squeers as “the representative of a class, and not of an individual. Where imposture, ignorance, and brutal cupidity are the stock in trade of a small body of men, and one is described by these characteristics, all his fellows will recognize something belonging to themselves, and each will have a misgiving that the portrait is his own."

By juxtaposing traditional formal evaluation principles with several literary examples, this presentation raises questions for evaluators to consider regarding our theories and practices. We show that some great authors have explored evaluation topics such as context, value conflicts, stakeholder power, criteria confusion, standards setting, and much more, in entertaining but consternating ways. They problematize the work of evaluators while inviting us to think more deeply about our work and the needs of those we serve.

Some ideas and questions to consider during the Roundtable discussion

1. How open are you as an evaluator to the claims of Schwandt and others that we need to expand our understanding of evaluation through contributions from the humanities?
2. How do you feel about Scriven’s plea in his 1999 AEA presidential address on “The Territory Ahead” that evaluators take a stronger position in infusing the teaching of evaluation principles into school curricula since evaluation is a trans-discipline that people engage in as part of everything else they do? Do you buy that claim? Is he talking about informal or formal evaluation as a trans-discipline? Does it matter? Do you agree that formal evaluation could be improved through better understanding of how stakeholders do informal evaluation? What is informal evaluation for you? How is it connected to formal evaluation, if it is?
3. Do you know of literature that examines how people actually practice informal evaluation in their daily lives? In particular, any phenomenological studies that really examine this concept explicitly? Scriven says the following in the 1991 Evaluation Thesaurus, 4th edition (Sage), page 262 about Phenomenology of Evaluation, which is a call for what I’m planning to do but for formal evaluations, not informal. But I have not found any actual descriptions of lived experiences of people doing informal evaluation? Have you?
4. Would you agree that novels contain many examples of informal evaluation?
5. Do you think the evaluations in novels and by novelists influence readers’ informal evaluations? Discuss the study “Hierarchy in the Library: Egalitarian Dynamics in Victorian Novels” by Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall, John A. Johnson, Daniel J. Kruger and reactions to this quote from pages 717-718 in particular from Evolutionary Psychology found at www.epjournal.net – 2008. 6(4): 715-738:

“The ability of novels to serve an adaptive social function depends on readers responding to characters in novels in much the same way, emotionally, as they respond to people in everyday life. They like or dislike them, admire them or despise them, fear them, feel sorry for them, or are amused by them. In writing fabricated accounts of human behavior, novelists select and organize their material for the purpose of generating such responses, and readers willingly cooperate with this purpose. They participate vicariously in the experiences depicted and form personal opinions about the qualities of the characters. Authors and readers thus collaborate in producing a simulated experience of emotionally responsive evaluative judgment.”

1. Do you read or have you read Victorian literature?
2. Would you say that reading influences how you make informal evaluations? If so, how? What about other literature?
3. Literature on Victorian novels (see some quotes summarized later) suggests that many authors were critical of social situations and called for reforms to overcome social injustice. Another way of thinking about this is that the authors were promoting a social agenda or criteria for how society should be and were evaluating the society they were critiquing. Whether the readers agree or not, they were given (and we are given today) examples of evaluations of their society by Victorian novelists (and we continue to have literature written today that evaluates society we can accept or not).
4. Literature on Victorian novels also indicates a push toward individualism or the responsibility of the individual to make their own choices and take their own actions. Another way to state that is that this literature encourages individuals to make their own evaluations. What are the implications of these claims for improving evaluations people conduct in every day life? Any implications for formal evaluations? What about for training or educating people as evaluators?
5. Some studies I’m considering doing and would invite your input on:
   1. Examine in greater depth what different genres of literature teach about evaluation that might influence readers to evaluate in those ways. In particular, I’m interested in the influence of literature read by most children and youth in schools.
   2. Ask children and youth if and how they feel what they read influences their informal evaluation lives. Ask adults to reflect back on the literature they read in school and since to explore how and if it influences their informal evaluation lives.
   3. Do multiple case studies to document people’s lived informal evaluation lives in personal, family, community, and across multiple disciplines, which use evaluation both informally and formally.
   4. Use literature and case studies to explore what evaluation is in human practice and the implications for understanding humans as agents. This could involve studying formal, informal, self and other focused evaluations. I want to examine it in all aspects of living—home, family, interpersonal, societal, political, sciences, arts, letters, religious and moral life, and as practiced in all the disciplines and professions.

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Schwandt, T. A. (2002). *Evaluation practice reconsidered*. New York: Peter Lang.

Scriven, M. (1991). *Evaluation Thesaurus*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Shadish, W. R. (1995). *Guiding principles for evaluators*. New Directions for Evaluation, no. 66. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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