



**Cornell University**  
Cornell Office for Research on Evaluation

# **Promoting Evaluative Thinking: A key ingredient in evaluation capacity**

**Presentation to the AEA**

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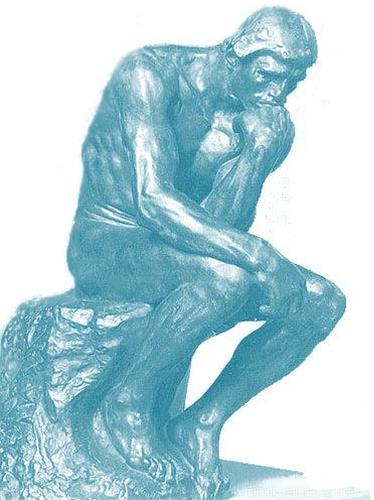
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# introductions



# **defining evaluative thinking**



# evaluative thinking is...*mentioned*:

“How do we build the capacity of individuals, teams, and organizations to think evaluatively and engage in evaluation practice?”

- Hallie Preskill (2008)

“Evaluative thinking is not just limited to evaluation projects...it’s an analytical way of thinking that infuses everything that goes on.”

- Michael Patton (2005)

“The concept of free-range evaluation captures the ultimate outcome of ECB: evaluative thinking that lives unfettered in an organization.”

- Jean King (2007)

“Willingness to ask: ‘How do we know what we think we know?’”

- Michael Patton (2005)

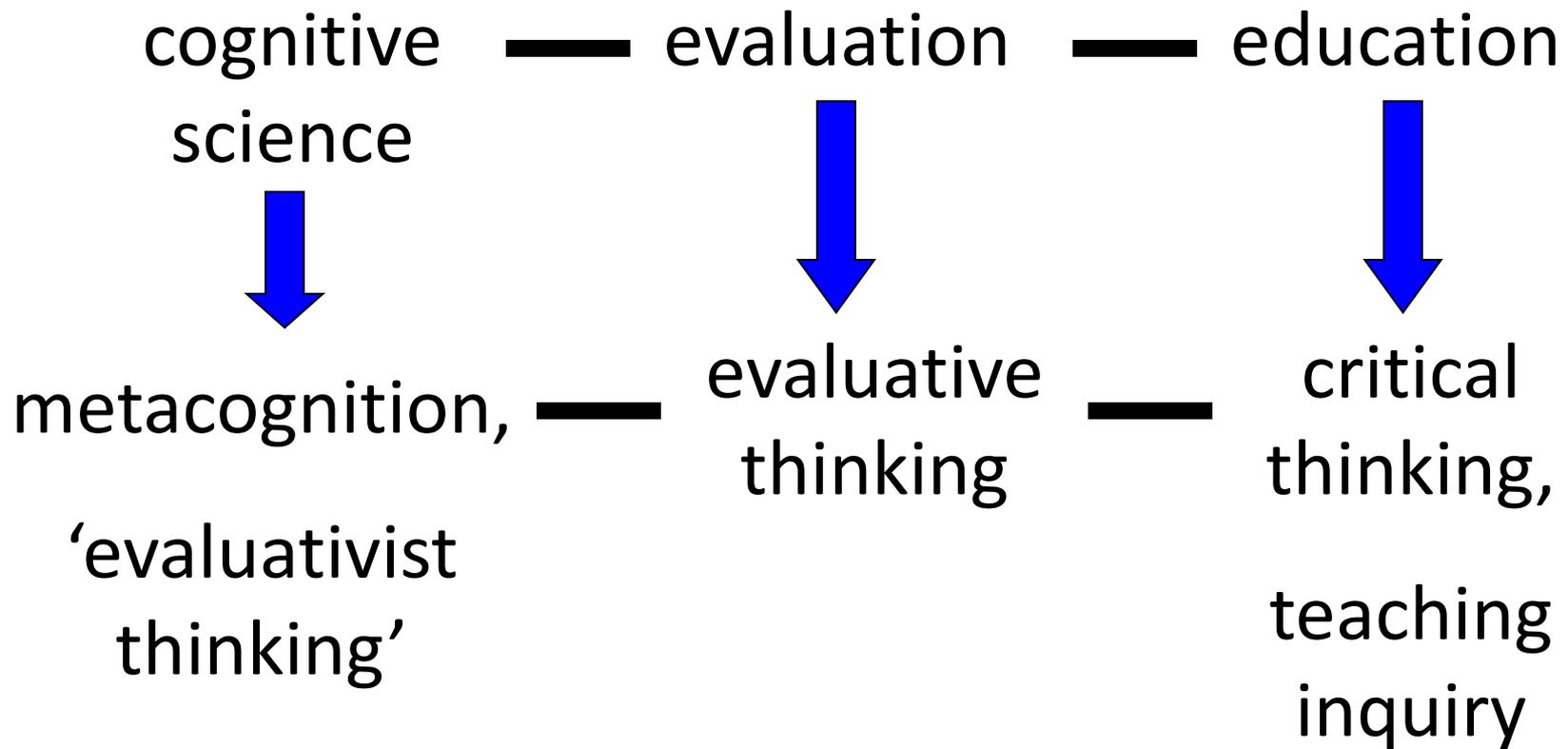
“Reminding all of us to think evaluatively!”

- Jim Rugh (n.d.)

*...but not*

*succinctly defined*

# defining evaluative thinking



# Thinking Skills

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- Questioning
- Reflection
- Decision Making
- Strategizing
- Identifying Assumptions

# Evaluative Attitudes

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- Desire for the truth
- Belief in the value of evaluation
- Belief in the value of evidence
- Inquisitiveness
- Skepticism



# Evaluative Thinking is...

a cognitive **process**, motivated by inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, which involves:



- (1) identifying assumptions,
- (2) posing thoughtful questions,
- (3) pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and
- (4) making informed decisions in preparation for action.



# indicators of evaluative thinking

Posing  
Thoughtful  
Questions

Describing and  
Illustrating  
Thinking

Actively  
Pursuing Deeper  
Understanding

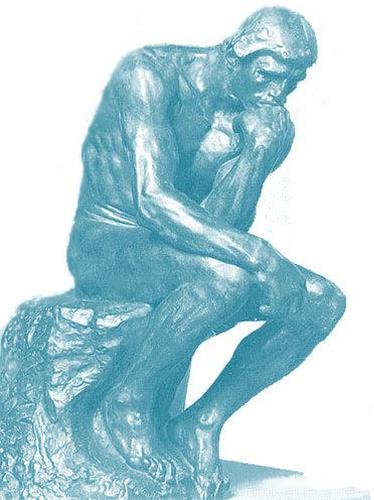
Expressing Belief  
in the Value of  
Evaluation

Seeking  
Alternatives

Identifying  
Assumptions



# **facilitating evaluative thinking**



when to begin:

**WAIT**

Change our  
organization's  
culture?

Teach people  
how to think?

START

# where to begin:

1. Look to the literature on critical thinking
2. Establish guiding principles for facilitating evaluative thinking
3. Consider the context
4. Apply principles in a contextually appropriate way

START

# *Four Guiding Principles:*

*I. Evaluative thinking is not a born-in skill; it must be intentionally practiced, and does not depend on a certain educational background (Brookfield, 2012; Ericsson, 1994; Perkins, 1986)*

*II. Evaluative thinking must be applied and practiced in multiple contexts alongside peers and colleagues (Bransford et. al., 1999; Brookfield, 2012; Halpern, 1998; Simon 1996)*

*III. Evaluative thinkers must be aware of—and work to overcome—assumptions and belief preservation (Brookfield, 2012; Lord et. al., 1979)*

*IV. Learning to think evaluatively (and practicing ET) must be intrinsically motivated and experienced incrementally (Bransford et.al., 1999; Brookfield, 2012; Piaget, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978)*

# **practical strategies**





**create an intentional evaluative  
thinking learning environment**

- 1. Display logic models**
- 2. Create “parking lots” for questions and assumptions**
- 3. Post inspirational questions:**
  - “Is there an alternative explanation?”
  - “How do we know what we think we know?”

**establish ET practice-focused discussions and/or meetings**



1. “Mine” your model
2. Use opening questions (Brookfield, 2012)
  - a. What assumptions are we working under?
  - b. How can we check our assumptions for accuracy?
  - c. What alternative perspectives or explanations might we use?
3. Conduct a media critique (Powell, 2010)
4. Engage in critical debate (*neutral but relevant topic*)

A stage with red curtains and a wooden floor. The text "use role-play when thinking about evaluation strategies" is centered on the curtains. The stage is lit from below, and there are four spotlights on the floor.

**use role-play  
when thinking  
about  
evaluation  
strategies**

A stage with red curtains and a wooden floor with spotlights. The curtains are pulled back, revealing a wooden floor with four spotlights. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box in the center of the stage.

# 1. Scenario analysis

(Brookfield, 2012)

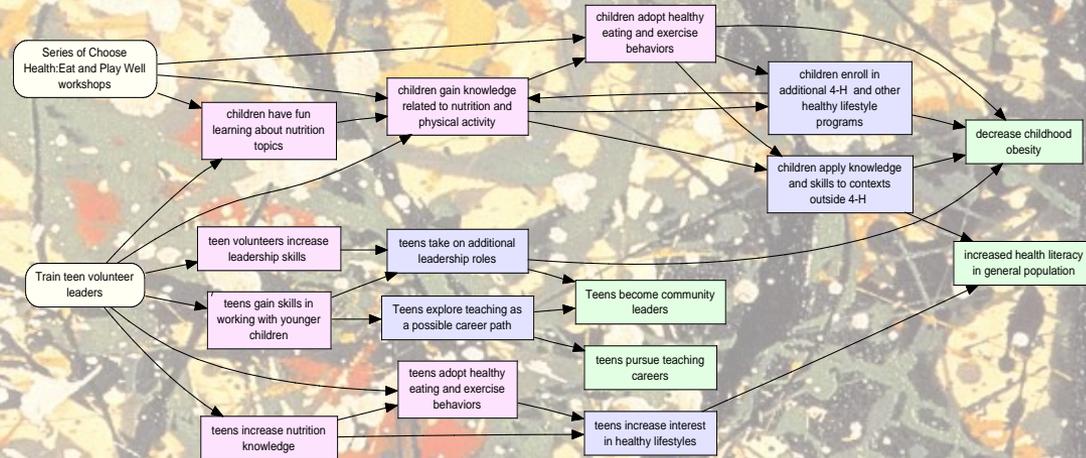
# 2. Thinking hats (De Bono, 1999)

# 3. Evaluation simulation

An abstract background featuring a dense, chaotic pattern of splatters and brushstrokes. The colors are primarily black, white, yellow, orange, and red, set against a dark, textured base. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and complexity.

diagram or illustrate thinking when  
communicating with colleagues

# 1. Build logic and pathway models



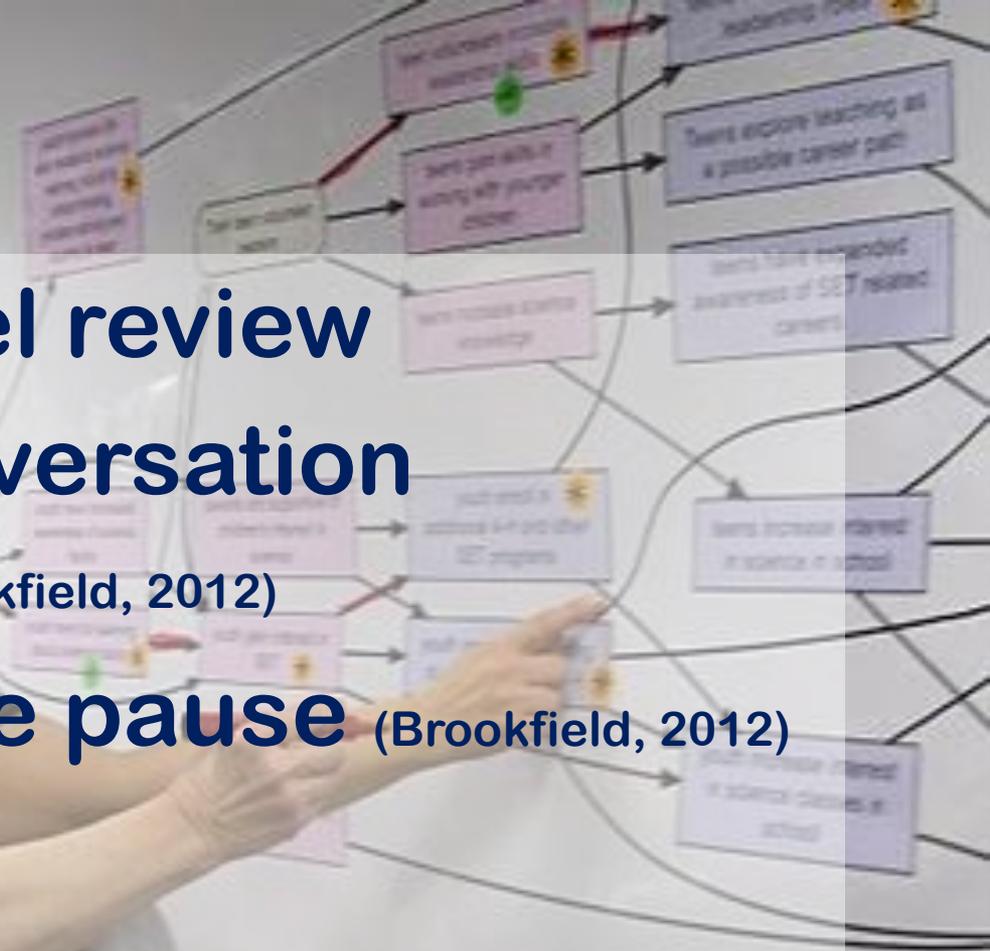
## 2. Diagram program history

## 3. Create a system, context or organization diagram



**engage in  
supportive, critical  
peer review**

1. **Logic model review**
2. **Critical conversation protocol** (Brookfield, 2012)
3. **Appreciative pause** (Brookfield, 2012)



**establish time and space to  
explore intrinsically motivated  
evaluation questions both  
formally and informally**

**don't leave  
evaluation  
exclusively to the  
evaluator(s)!**



# considerations at the organization level:

- Formal support in the form of policy
- Allocation of time and resources
- Buy-in and participation at all levels of the organization's hierarchy
- Start with evaluative thinking champions—work toward a tipping point



**thank  
you!**

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