

Evaluation specialists prefer data, however trivial, to human perceptions, however true.

Democratization of Curriculum Evaluation

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For the last two decades curriculum evaluation has been considered too important and too complex to be left to members of the curriculum field. Earlier in the century, however, it was considered too unimportant and unsystematic to concern anyone but a member of the field.

The change occurred in the post-Sputnik years when curriculum became a national concern. First, prestigious outsiders took up the challenge to reform the nation's curriculums. Next, by the middle 1960s a massive influx of federal money intended to provide so-called "objective" evaluations of federally funded curriculums ensured the creation of the professional evaluator as a special class in curriculum apart from the traditional members of the field. Basically unfamiliar with the nature and history of curriculum, the professional evaluator staked a claim to objectivity by borrowing assumptions from the psychometric, experimental tradition in educational research and by embracing a methodology drawn from general "evaluation research." As a result, curriculum evaluation has come to be regarded as a technical process: the application of a standardized methodology of evaluation in education in order to reach non-problematical decisions about social policy.

Basically, this tradition assumes that empirically verifiable data col-

lected under carefully controlled procedures should be used to determine causal relationships, and it tends to identify evaluation with the fit between specified goals and measured results of a curriculum. This is useful because of the degree of statistical confidence provided in asserting that results were caused by specific features of the curriculum. In practice, the person who collects such descriptive data often stops short of questioning the stated purposes or the educational and social significance of the curriculum and may pass the data themselves and inferences about causality along to a more remote "decision maker"—perhaps a government official—who may pass judgment on the curriculum. In this way the person who collects data may refrain from full evaluation and act as part of a functional bureaucracy. The extreme emphasis thus placed on the formalized procedures themselves strongly implies that only persons of highly specialized training are competent to collect and quantitatively analyze descriptive data. While these assumptions and methods do not constitute the whole of contemporary curriculum evaluation, they very probably represent the now dominant form.

"Professional" Evaluations Questioned

In recent years the dominant form of curriculum evaluation has increasingly been questioned by many sources. First, educational evaluators became disenchanted with "evaluation research" in general and developed an influential critique.¹ Second, educational anthropologists recognized that their own methods of uncovering the culture of the classroom

through ethnography can provide a powerful tool for evaluation, and the Council on Anthropology and Education actively promoted ethnographies as a form of educational evaluation.² Third, in Great Britain, where curriculum evaluation is much less dominated by the psychometric tradition, methods of "illuminative" evaluation are highly influential in curriculum.³ Fourth, people with deep roots in the curriculum field in the United States have developed alternative forms of evaluation, variously called "responsive"⁴ or "qualitative"⁵ evaluation, or "educational criticism."⁶ These forms may parallel some of the major developments in recent years within the curriculum field in general.⁷ Finally, all these sources of questioning may also parallel many grassroots movements by teachers and other curriculum workers to participate spontaneously in curriculum evaluation.

Taken together, these developments clearly show a growing dissatisfaction with the limitations and the stylized methods of the dominant form of curriculum evaluation and a push toward the use of naturalistic forms, forms which depend less on controlled experimentation and instrumentation and more on direct perceptions and thoughtful decisions by active participants in a curriculum. This push may indicate a return to many historical concerns of the curriculum field about how to help students value their worlds, and a corresponding enlargement and readmission of the many kinds of data and people useful in thorough curriculum evaluation.

The Processes of Criticism

To be thorough, curriculum evalua-

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tion must incorporate the four basic processes of criticism inherent in any fully developed evaluation: observation, description, interpretation, and judgment.⁸ Often the dominant form of curriculum evaluation focuses on description only; in contrast, naturalistic forms provide greater richness by encouraging the development of all four processes in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives.

Observation begins in the multitude of immediate, personal perceptions of a participant within a situation. Since no one person can perceive all the tangible characteristics of a situation, nor will any two people perceive precisely the same intangible qualities of the situation, observation is ultimately a carefully disciplined and selective process of attempting to encounter the "What is going on here?" of a specific situation. Skill in observation can be developed, often through experience. For instance, experience as a teacher is important to insightful observations of educational situations.

Description is an evocative recreation of what the critic has encountered. Again the critic must make skillfully disciplined selections about which of the many observations to portray and how to portray them effectively. In so doing the critic must portray accurately and evocatively both the most significant tangible characteristics of a situation and the most telling intangible qualities which give the situation its particular texture or tone. For people who have not participated in the situation, these descriptions form the basis for their own perceptions; for people who have participated, the descriptions provide a comparative basis for expanding and heightening their perceptions.

Interpretation is how the critic discloses meaning about what has been encountered. While some interpretations may be implicit within the critic's descriptions, they are usually explicit statements which compare the situation to a set of ideas or events which illuminate it. For instance, the critic may relate the situation to a body of theoretical or explanatory principles, or to characteristics of the socioeconomic context, or may compare the internal configurations and patterns within the situation with others that might

have occurred. The critic must select interpretations from among the myriad of those plausible, and the best are ordinarily those which create the most incisive and significant insights about what the situation means.

Judgment is a statement of the quality and significance of what has been encountered. Basically, the critic addresses questions concerning the goodness of what is going on. How well done is what is being done? Is it worth doing in the first place? In addressing such questions, the critic should consider both the internal qualities of the situation and its external significance. For instance, it is possible to judge a trivial activity carried out perfectly as less praiseworthy than a significant activity carried out imperfectly. Informed judgment is a disciplined activity requiring wisdom and skill. While skill is far easier to cultivate than wisdom, the wisdom of critics' judgments can best be judged when critics provide reasons revealing their own value systems.

A Universal, Human Activity

To be thorough and fully developed, all forms of naturalistic evaluation must incorporate these four basic critical processes, and in so far as they incorporate them, they become distinctly human activities: they honor and enhance the workings of human consciousness, as opposed to subordinating human consciousness to the operations of a technical system. They value the qualities of human experiencing. Thus, all forms of naturalistic evaluation begin in the personal perceptions and insights of any potential critic, but they can also end in the re-education of the insights and activities of others.

The more skillful a critic (and sometimes the more self-conscious) in rendering personal insights and linking them with the external social and political world, the more the likelihood of influencing the perceptions, thoughts, and actions of others. In any case, however, all naturalistic evaluation is largely the same kind of common sense process that most people use throughout their lives to form opinions about people, things, and events. Although the soundness of such opinions and their usefulness for others can often be enhanced by careful attentions to the inherent critical processes, the point is that evalu-

ation is not fundamentally an arcane activity which can be competently engaged in only by professionals with specialized training or knowledge.

Fundamentally, evaluation is an on-going human activity in which all people attempt to make sense of their worlds; in so doing all people may help educate themselves and, potentially, all others. Done well, naturalistic evaluation permits the sharing of insights about both what is true and what is valuable. From individual, personal insights about the qualities of living ultimately flow social consequences.

Democratized Curriculum Evaluation

In curriculum evaluation, this educative process often proceeds through a critic's identifying the most significant or pervasive characteristics of a classroom setting and relating them to their social context. By emphasizing certain qualities of experiencing that occur in response to the situation, the critic illuminates and discloses meaning about the setting by evoking similar responses in other people. While such an evaluation may be especially vivid and compelling, it can also provide a remarkably accurate and powerful portrayal of such specifics as the curriculum itself; the activities of students, teachers, and administrators; the physical and the social contexts; and the mutual influences that exist among these specifics. It can clearly expose the value system of the critic and make obvious the reasons for the critic's judgments. Furthermore, critics may be participants in the setting itself (such as teachers and students) or direct observers (such as supervisors, external evaluators, and parents). The mutual exchange of critical insights from a variety of perspectives can broaden the basis for joint decisions.

In these terms, curriculum evaluation is anything but an elitist activity, for it encourages on-going participation by a wide variety of people formulating judgments through a variety of naturalistic methods and working toward common social policies through an open process which fosters personal autonomy and a democratic, self-educating political community. Since all interested people can engage in curriculum evaluation (in fact they already do, however inarticulately), they have the responsibility to do so well, since each opin-

ion helps to form and to educate the political community in which all participate.

Fortunately, what preserves the possibility that curriculum evaluation can be both universal and excellent is the fact that virtually anyone can develop and refine skills necessary to carry out reasonably the process of criticism. While providing proper encouragement and training of this kind to its members has always been one of the basic needs of the curriculum field, this need will become especially pressing during the 1980s as curriculum evaluation becomes increasingly democratized. As more and more people working in curriculum participate in evaluation using an increasing variety of naturalistic, qualitative methods, new means must become widely available to familiarize them with the basic processes of criticism and to help them formulate these into incisive, informative, and well written evaluation studies.

Objectivity and Democracy

When critics are skillful, this kind of democratized, naturalistic curriculum evaluation can be highly rigorous. Though it begins with and honors individual human perceptions (subjectivity if you will), it can, in fact, also make a claim to a higher objectivity than can the dominant form. In the dominant form objectivity becomes synonymous with reliability, the agreement among observers on what they see and the replication of observations. Only what can be agreed on is considered objective; what cannot be agreed on is dismissed as subjective. The major problem with this view is that it sacrifices validity to reliability, for it rejects valid data subjectively obtained. In practice, individual human perceptions, however true, are subordinated to data obtained through instrumentation, however trivial. The search for consensus replaces the search for truth.

Michael Scriven⁹ has pointed out that this quantitative notion of objectivity confuses the method of verification with truth; in contrast, the qualitative notion of objectivity, on which naturalistic evaluation rests, depends on the validity (or quality) of observations, not on immediate agreement among observers. In the qualitative notion, being objective is being free from bias and distortion.

Freedom from bias and distortion

cannot be guaranteed by agreement among observers as a means of verification. Complete agreement is likely only on those few technical matters which do little to inform both individual and collective perceptions, interpretations, and judgments. Freedom from bias and distortion, then, becomes both an individual and a political process. Verification of truth comes only as each person formulates individual views of a problematic situation and submits these views to the scrutiny of other people. The search for why some personal perceptions are better ways of understanding and acting on reality than are others is itself a search for qualitative differences which entails the processes of criticism. Truth is known at last within the final collective process of "judgment," and the validity found in subjective, personal perceptions opened to public scrutiny for qualitative comparisons is a more telling way of reaching objectivity than is the reliability found in quantitative consensus. Instead of the suppression of individual, personal perceptions and subsequent interpretations and judgments, they become the subject of inquiry and debate in order to free collective perceptions of truth from bias and distortion. In this sense, engaging in the processes of criticism may re-educate the perceptions of the critic as much as the perceptions of the collective political community.

This notion of objectivity is consistent with democratic political theory. It does not guarantee universal agreement about truth, but it does lead to working agreements about social policies arrived at through open deliberations in which all interested individuals can participate. Applied to curriculum evaluation, it means that teachers, supervisors, other curriculum workers, and other interested participants in or observers of a curriculum can and should also participate in evaluative deliberations whenever feasible. In fact, each individual has an obligation to do so, for each individual's own perceptions are potentially those most nearly free of bias and distortion and, therefore, those of potentially greatest educative value to the political community.

Obviously, each individual also has an obligation to participate as well as possible, primarily by cultivating skill in using naturalistic methods embodying critical processes. Thus, curricu-

lum workers of all kinds will seldom need to suspend their own judgments while an expert's data are still out. Rather, the increasingly skillful use in curriculum evaluation of a variety of naturalistic methods will foster personal judgments about the lived qualities of classrooms and their educational and social significance. Such judgments by curriculum workers based on their own perceptions will, in turn, form the basis for autonomous but responsible professional decisions within an increasingly perceptive and responsive political community. ■

¹ L. Ross and L. J. Cronbach, "Handbook of Evaluation Research: Essay Review," *Educational Researcher* 5 (November 1976): 9-19.

² See many recent issues of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*.

³ M. Parlett and D. Hamilton, *Evaluation as Illumination: A New Approach to the Study of Innovative Programs*, Occasional Paper 9 (Edinburgh: Center for Research in Educational Sciences, University of Edinburgh, 1972); D. Hamilton; B. MacDonald; C. King; D. Jenkins; and M. Parlett, *Beyond the Numbers Game: A Reader in Educational Evaluation* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

⁴ R. Stake, *Evaluating the Arts in Education* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1975).

⁵ G. Willis, ed., *Qualitative Evaluation: Concepts and Cases in Curriculum Criticism* (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1978).

⁶ E. W. Eisner, "The Impoverished Mind," *Educational Leadership* 35 (May 1978): 615-623; *The Educational Imagination: On The Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

⁷ Particularly Joseph Schwab's notion of "the practical" and recent "Reconceptualist" curriculum thought. For a discussion see: W. H. Schubert, "Recalibrating Educational Research: Toward a Focus on Practice," *Educational Researcher* 9 (January 1980): 17-24.

⁸ For a similar three-part breakdown of the processes of criticism, see: G. McCutcheon, "Of Solar Systems, Responsibilities, and Basics: An Educational Criticism of Mr. Clement's Fourth Grade," in *Qualitative Evaluation: Concepts and Cases in Curriculum Criticism*, pp. 186-205.

⁹ M. Scriven, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in Educational Research," in *Redirecting Educational Research*, ed. L. G. Thomas, NSSE Yearbook, Part 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 94-115.

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