TRUTH WROUGHT IN TALES: 
AN EXPLORATION OF HOW 
CASE-STUDY EVALUATIONS ARE RECEIVED 
BY THOSE PARTICIPATING IN THE PROCESS 

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Truth is never pure, and rarely simple.—Oscar Wilde 

It is a truism that program evaluators are concerned to see their evaluation findings used to improve programs. Indeed, the use of program evaluation findings has become an area of study in its own right, whole volumes have been devoted to it. These researchers break up the evaluation enterprise into various components, relationship between evaluator and client, clarification of the goals of the program and of the evaluation, organizational status of personnel who will be expected to change their working habits, magnitude and nature of the evaluation's recommendations, and so forth. As researchers attempt to understand how these various aspects of the process affect the use of evaluation findings, they find that they must also examine the nature of the evaluation report itself and the level of truth its readers find in it. 

The emergence of case-study evaluations as an acceptable way of generating data for change has intensified the interest in the power of the evaluation report to bring about recommended changes in programs. The case-study method sets great store by the power of the written report to bring those concerned with the subject of the study to a richer understanding of that subject. The expectation is that the opportunity for reflection afforded the participants and decision makers through the thick description of the case study will promote the use of the findings. “Change occurs when events of the world make sense to people.” This paper explores how professional educators, both administrators and teachers, are drawn to reflect on their practice by evaluation reports. 

THE ROLE OF TRUTH IN USING EVALUATION FINDINGS

In her study of how professionals use new information, Mary Kennedy identified three analytically distinct processes:

The first is that of seeking out new evidence and attending to it, the second is that of incorporating it into existing working knowledge, and the third is that of applying it to working situations as they arise.  

When considering case-study evaluations, the first process does not apply, since the participants are already aware of the existence of the case study. The other two, however, are important.

This investigation examined how participants in three case-study evaluations incorporated and applied the evaluation findings to their own situations. The investigation focused on how the participants established in their own minds the truth of the evaluation reports. Truth, in this context, means, "To speak not of underlying attributes, objective observables, and universal forces, but of perceptions and understandings that come from immersion in and holistic regard for the phenomena." If the reader of an evaluation report does not establish a truth relationship with the report, then any use of the findings is unlikely. Therefore, this investigation examined the sine qua non of report use. It sought an answer to the question: Granted the relative nature of subjective truth, what factors govern how the recipients receive and then act on the findings of case-study evaluations?

THE INVESTIGATION

The opportunity for this investigation arose when three graduate students in my program-evaluation class elected to carry out small case-study evaluations as their major assignment for the course. Two of these evaluations concentrated on two experimental courses in a local high school and the third evaluated the effects, as perceived by the teachers involved, of a computer-based problem-solving program in grades 5 and 6 classrooms.

I took no overt part in the evaluations. As far as the clients in the three programs were concerned, the students were the sole evaluators. They negotiated the focus of the studies, gained access, carried out the evaluations, and presented the reports. My investigation into the nature of the practitioners' reflection in the light of the findings, while it drew on the experiences at the three sites, was done independently from my students' evaluations of them. There were three data-collection phases.

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Phase 1

Shortly before the student evaluators presented their reports, I interviewed two people attached to each program: the teacher who was delivering the program and the administrator who had the closest involvement with the program and who would, along with the teacher, be expected to take appropriate action on the strength of the findings. I explained that I was interested in finding out their response to evaluation or research reports. During these first semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked a range of questions:

- What aspects of a report make it appealing to you?
- How do you like evaluation or research findings to be disseminated?
- What factors (e.g., the authority of the researcher, the style of writing, the data collection, reporting, and analysis procedures) affect the impact of a report?
- How do you estimate the truth of the findings of a report?
- In what ways does your estimate of the truth of a report relate to its effectiveness?

The interview focused on reports in general, not on the specific report of the case-study evaluation in which they were concurrently participating. At no time during the study did I define the word truth. The ways the participants used the term emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts.

Phase 2

After the first interviews, I left behind a sheet for the participants to keep until the evaluation report was delivered. I asked the participants to record their immediate reactions—"gut reactions"—to the report after they read it. I gave no specific directions or headings, but I told the participants that I was interested in their perception of the truth of the report and how they assessed that truth.

Phase 3

After at least a week had passed since the report was delivered, and in the light of the participants' first interviews and their initial reaction sheets, I conducted a second round of semi-structured interviews. This time, the main intent was to find out the respondents' assessment of the truth of the report, how they arrived at that assessment, and what they were going to do about the report now that they had the findings.

THE THREE PROGRAMS

To supply the context of my investigation, the three programs evaluated are described briefly. The details are not important here, since the focus is
not on the evaluation findings but rather on the power of the reports to engender reflection and then action.

1. **High school drama.** The course offered students the opportunity to learn some of the crafts of theater and to improve their self-knowledge and self-concept through creative drama activities. Mr. Ruby, the teacher, was an experienced English teacher who had developed the course with the encouragement of the administration. Mr. Hazel, the principal, was the administrator interviewed. He has a strong background in both English and drama; he supported the course and was interested in the evaluation study.

2. **Music apprentice.** This program was from the same large urban high school as the drama program. Again, it sprang from the personal initiative of the teacher, a music and band instructor. Mr. Miller had developed a program for exceptionally gifted music students to earn credits by working with him both behind the scenes and also in a leadership capacity (e.g., conducting bands and helping during sectional practice). The administrator chosen to participate in this study was Mr. Griffiths, a central office superintendent who was responsible for forwarding an evaluation of the program to the Provincial Department of Education. The music-apprentice course had been authorized by the department on a provisional basis, with the condition that the school board submit an evaluation (although not necessarily the evaluation referred to in this paper).

3. **Problem solving with computers.** The school board had recently adopted a commercially available program designed to allow elementary students to gain problem-solving skills by requiring them to devise a means of drawing figures on the computer screen. Ms. Dart was one of the teachers offering the course, and Mr. Cook was the central office consultant who was monitoring the progress of the new program.

**THE RESPONSE TO THE REPORTS**

Assessments of the level of truth of the reports, as given by both teachers and administrators, are presented in this section.9

How the Teachers Assessed the Level of Truth of the Reports

In the initial interview, Mr. Ruby said that one of the ways he evaluated the level of truth of a program report was by consulting with peers who had tried the program.

Researcher (during a discussion of an earlier report of an innovative program): How do you evaluate in your own mind the level of truth?

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9All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

9While responses to all three evaluation reports are cited in this paper, more extensive use of the responses to the drama report will be apparent throughout, especially in the sections toward the end of the paper.
Mr. Ruby: The fact that other people have tried it and heard good things about it and experienced good things about it. So it's practical application, I guess. The fact that it achieved success.

Researcher: Is that a general way in which you evaluate the truth of findings, by checking them with your colleagues?

Mr. Ruby: If it is appropriate, yes. I think I would tend to do that as often as it was possible to do that.

This process of estimating the truth of a report by checking, more or less informally, one's personal beliefs against colleagues' perceptions of truth (here called *confirmable truth*) was echoed by the other teachers.

Ms. Dart, the teacher involved in the computer-literacy study, also set great store by the views of her colleagues. She talked of relying on her friends and the people "in the know." She relied not only on her peers, though. In discussing an earlier report that she had rated as very truthful, she responded to the question "How did you evaluate in your own mind that level of truth?"

It came from . . . a reputable source. No reason to doubt it. It had come through proper channels. . . . Basically, any [reports] put into our mailboxes pretty well come through [the principal].

Mr. Miller also used confirmation from colleagues to help him in his assessment of the truth of a report. In a discussion of a particularly ineffective report that had appeared some years earlier, the following dialogue took place:

Researcher: Thinking of that ineffective report, how true did you feel were its findings?

Mr. Miller: They were not true at all.

Researcher: On what basis did you evaluate in your own mind that level of truth?

Mr. Miller: Through the experience of the person involved as far as accomplishment in the area that he was complaining about. In what I had heard in the system

Researcher: Your private knowledge?

Mr. Miller: Yes.

The role of confirmation by peers came up again during the second round of interviews. Mr. Ruby expressed an overall confidence in the truthfulness of the report on his program, although he did feel that some of the case study's orientation sprang from the evaluator's known view of what creative drama courses should try to accomplish. After digesting the report, Mr. Ruby took several initiatives; first, he estimated the level of confirmable truth. In this instance, however, he had no colleagues to turn to, since his unique program was the subject of the case-study evaluation. Instead, he turned to the students, the only other people who participated in the case study. He discussed the findings of the report with the students and used that dialogue to gain a greater understanding of the students' views of the purpose of the course. He found that the evaluation report was a fair reflection of the
students’ feelings, checking the report’s findings against the views of the students helped him confirm the report’s truthfulness.

Ms. Dart, because she was one of several teachers participating in the computer course, was able to consult with her colleagues:

*Researcher*: How true did you feel were the findings of this report?

*Ms. Dart*: Good, I really did.

*Researcher*: What helped you have confidence in the findings?

*Ms. Dart*: I had that interest initially and . . . I thought, “Well, I want to read these and see, because I know P. [a colleague] felt the same way. A girlfriend of mine, she said, ‘Have you read the [computer study] report?’ and G. [another colleague] said the same thing to me. . . . We wanted to see if others were feeling the same way.

On the other hand, Mr. Miller, the music teacher, did not consult with any colleagues to confirm the truth of the report. He felt that the report faithfully represented the program. Besides, nobody, except perhaps the evaluator herself, knew as much as he did about his own program. The report was strong in *affirming truth*, a term that will be discussed below when the views of Mr. Hazel, the administrator who coined the term, are given.

**How the Administrators Assessed the Level of Truth of the Reports**

While the teachers verified the findings of the report mainly by seeking confirmation from their colleagues, the administrators used more varied techniques. Mr. Hazel began his discussion of how he assesses the truth of a report by distinguishing between what for him were two different kinds of truth:

I can say: “There is truth in that” because it affirmed . . . beliefs of mine . . . . The other kind of truth . . . builds from the inherent qualities of the report—apart from what I believe.

In his discussion of the concept of *affirming truth*, Mr. Hazel said:

Affirmation is a very important point for drawing the reader into a trust relationship with the report. I don’t think that it has to be artificial affirmation (“Things are wonderful, everything is fine,” and all that) but rather some very specific points that cause some good feeling. I think you generate change by first of all having the person feel comfortable and positive about some practices that are currently in place.

When asked how he evaluated the level of the other type of truth, the *inherent truth*, he said:

It generated action on my part. I suppose if I can be moved to action by what I read, then that shows a sort of truth or belief in [the report] . . . . The data and the conviction of the writer in the conclusion drawn from the data generated my response.

Mr. Cook, the administrator in the computer-literacy study, relied, as did the teachers, mainly on confirmable truth. Commenting on an earlier report that he believed presented true findings, he said:
It was done by people that I know, who are teachers I know, with schools that I know. ... I like a report that's close to home, that's done with our kids and our settings as opposed to faraway places where you may not know the setting as well and possibly the person who is preparing the report.

For Mr. Cook, the closeness to home was not simply a matter of the greater applicability of findings that had been generated in a system in which the findings would be most easily implemented; but it was a very real way of validating the findings of a report, regardless of whether these findings would be implemented in the schools. He also indicated that he would use local expert resources (e.g., a university professor who was a specialist in Mr. Cook's discipline) to help validate the findings of a report.

While Mr. Griffiths, the administrator for the music apprentice program, stressed the importance of affirming truth, he also reported that he would use the expert resources available to him to confirm the findings of a report. He also was receptive to inherent truth; for him, the inherent truth of a report came from its internal consistency.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TYPES OF TRUTH AND ENGENDERMENT OF ACTION

The three types of truth identified from the analysis of the interviews must be, at least partly, rationalizations of a holistic process of assessing truth. However, the analysis of the concept of truth into the subcomponents of confirmable truth, affirming truth, and inherent truth is useful when we consider the requirements that a case-study evaluation must meet to achieve its purpose of bringing about action. The three types will be discussed in turn, in ascending order of significance for case-study evaluation reports.

Confirmable Truth

For teachers and other professionals, seeking confirmation from colleagues is a common way of achieving verification. Often, confirmation is the most powerful way of instigating change; strong social forces are at play here. However, because seeking confirmation is socially derived and driven and can operate almost independently of the realities of the report, the method is of least concern here. In the case studies of the drama and computer courses, the teachers sought confirmation from other participants in the study. Therefore, an evaluator, by delimiting the personnel involved in a case study, may be arbitrarily affecting the sources of confirmable truth that participants can turn to later for verification.

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Affirming Truth

Affirming truth arises directly from the client's interpretation of the report. Since this truth is a quality of the parts of a report that directly affirm what the client believes, it does not itself lead to action, but affirming truth is a necessary prelude to action. It is the link between the mind of the evaluator and the mind of the client, its presence indicates that the evaluator has interpreted correctly (correctly in the sense of similarly) the viewpoint of the client-reader. Affirming truth in a report establishes a bond between the two parties involved. Mr. Hazel, when asked if the report on the drama program contained affirming truth for him, said:

Yes, I think it did. And what it did—and this is based on some knowledge of drama—is it affirmed my belief that there are two schools of thought [on what a drama course should aim for], and that becomes apparent here.

The drama teacher, Mr. Ruby, felt that, even though he disagreed with some of the report's recommendations, the findings affirmed what was going on in the class. He felt this way even though he needed to interpret some details of the report to reach his judgment.

Researcher: How true did you feel that [the evaluator's] findings were, even the ones that came as a shock?

Mr. Ruby: Very true. I think they were accurate reflections of what was going on and the things that the kids found important. In a sense—and I guess I am reading into the kids' minds a bit—they were saying... “This is new, and no one ever told us about this, that this was going to happen. This is really kind of neat and really kind of fun!” And they didn’t get to the point of saying, “Oh, and we’re also learning theatre.” I think it was there, but they just didn’t say it, if you know what I mean.

Mr. Griffiths also felt that the music-apprentice report contained affirming truth:

My reaction to the report was very positive because I started off with a mind-set, I say [to myself, about all programs], “Is what we are doing worth it?” And if I go through [the report] and the testimonials are saying, “This was a very worthwhile experience for me,” then I say obviously we are doing something right. That came through from the students, the teacher, and the parents, so I feel very positive about that.

However, if the report does not contain what the reader feels is affirming truth, anything else the report says will probably not engender change. Mr. Miller, trying to convey how an earlier report totally failed to make a connection between the writer of the report and the reader, said, “You look at [the recommendations] and say, ‘Get lost!’ That’s what [that report] was like.”

Inherent Truth

If affirming truth is the quality that a report must have to build credibility and trust between the researcher and the client, then inherent truth is the requirement for moving people from the present situation (which has been affirmed) to a new situation. As Mr. Hazel said, for the recipient of a report, a
kind of truth "builds from the inherent qualities of the report—apart from what I believe." This type of truth gives the recipient the confidence and motivation to move from the present position that has been affirmed to a new position along the lines suggested by the report.

This investigation suggests a close connection between the willingness to move in new directions and the mover's strength of belief in the inherent truth of the report. Inherent truth was difficult for the participants to describe in words, but they had no doubts that they would recognize it when they felt it. When participants bestowed the mantle of inherent truth on the findings of a report, they seemed to be incorporating the findings into what Thomas J. Sergiovanni has called "augmented professional intelligence." Such intelligence, which "is intended to inform the intuitions of practitioners as they practice," comes from reflective practice; the concept of inherent truth captures an instance when the reflections of someone else—the case-study evaluator—are admitted to a professional's construction of a situation because those reflections resonate with those of the professional.

At least two dimensions of inherent truth seemed to emerge from the interview data: the requirement that the recipient perceive that the evaluator is empathetic to the program and the participants in the program and the power that comes from a well-written and well-constructed report. At first, these two dimensions seem somewhat naive. Indeed, because participants seemed to share only these two, I re-examined the transcripts in case I had missed something. On reflection, though, the lack of sophisticated dimensions of inherent truth and the strength of these two prosaic ones made sense. While participants have many opportunities to assess affirming truth (since the report is dealing with a context familiar to them), they have much less opportunity to carry out "perception checks" on the terra incognita that is being assessed for its inherent truth.

The empathetic evaluator. It was important for the teachers to feel that the evaluator could resonate with their situation, could empathize with them and with what they were trying to accomplish. As Mr. Miller said in a post-report interview:

*Mr. Miller:* I would think that that report was, in her estimation—and I respect what she was doing—accurate in as far as she can see and as far as she can develop it, so I have no problems with it.

*Researcher:* One thing that struck me about [the evaluation report] was that she drew very heavily on you—that she had a lot of interviews with you and a lot of come-back time, and so on. Did you feel that she captured your views on it?

*Mr. Miller:* I think throughout the interviews there was a lot of insight for me. . . . This is the first time in a couple of years that I have ever talked to anyone about any details of the course, which was helpful for me. . . . She seemed to portray that in the

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report and she talked about some great things in there, too, which I didn't think she had caught.

For Mr. Ruby, the empathy came from the evaluator's experience in drama education and from his willingness to help out in the classroom from time to time (e.g., with small-group work). This empathy did not extend, however, to a wholesale acceptance of the evaluation report's findings:

The report was legitimate because it did express what was going on... Now, I think I'm still doing the same thing; it's just that now I am more aware of what I'm doing. The report seemed to imply (to me anyway) that that is all that I should do... And I am not prepared to go that far yet. But the report is legitimate in that it does express what is happening here in terms of the interpersonal things and the interaction things.

Andrew D. Seidel has reported that, for architects, "positive personal contact with the researcher" is one of the most important factors, in the client's eyes, for increasing "information quality."

The power of a well-written report. The drama report initiated some immediate action. While the report found that the course was effective, measured against the teacher's expressed expectations, it was actually achieving outcomes that the evaluator felt were even more significant than the ones Mr. Ruby had offered for the course. Mr. Ruby's initial reaction to the report (which had been presented to him individually by the evaluator) was complex.

My reactions to the report changed as we went through it. At first, I was pleased and somewhat proud that my students' responses and feelings about the class were the same as mine. Then I noticed that some of their perceptions, and the reporter's perceptions as stated in the report, began to differ from mine, and my initial pleasure turned to a momentary fear that I had failed to communicate my meanings and perceptions to them. Then I noticed myself becoming a bit angry with the reporter because he seemed to be criticizing my work and my class (which of course in reality he was not).

In his report, the evaluator had concentrated on two main findings. First, the course seemed to be offering students some exciting and unanticipated outcomes (in the area of self-expression and self-knowledge), which the evaluator felt should become the focus of the course. Second, the students were concerned about some aspects of the teacher's evaluation procedures. After verifying with his students that the report's findings did indeed reflect their views, Mr. Ruby acted on the findings. While never surrendering his professional autonomy and judgment, he began to change the program.

1. He carefully weighed the report's findings on the unanticipated outcomes of the course. He decided he did not want the course to evolve so far that he would have to sacrifice aspects of the course that he felt were even more important than the unanticipated outcomes. He also felt that, while these...

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outcomes might have been unexpressed, they were probably not truly unan-
ticipated because he had subconsciously provided a setting where they could
appear.

2. He initiated a plan to make his intentions for the course more explicit
Thus, he could reaffirm his basic purposes for the course, accommodate to
some degree the "unanticipated" outcomes within his plan, and make his
policies on evaluation clearer to the students.

The administrator, Mr. Hazel, set strict criteria for judging the inherent
truth of a report. If these criteria were not met, then the effectiveness of the
report, its power to promote change, would be compromised. (In general,
the three administrators in this study had criteria of this kind, although not
always the same criteria. Their having to read many more reports in the course
of their duties than do the teachers probably explains this outcome.) For Mr.
Hazel, clarity was crucial. He required of a report "that it be lucid, above all
else, and precise, and that it have an absence of 'educese' I think the English
language has enough options that one can use highly concrete words."

Researcher. And would you go so far as to say that the quality of the report will
actually influence the way you receive a report?

Mr. Hazel: Very definitely. I'm very influenced by the way in which things are
written. And my trust of research is very much based on the lucidity with which it is
presented.

Mr. Hazel's criterion of stylistic excellence came to the fore when he
wrote his initial reaction to the drama course evaluation:

Throughout the initial reading, I wanted to "red-pen" the form and structure. I was
troubled by punctuation problems. ... I looked for titles to chapters. Since [those
were] unavailable, I had no alternative but to begin at the beginning. What the foregoing
... reveals is perhaps my idiosyncratic reading of analytical material. I first want to be
able to provide myself with an overview of the report. I then am quite likely at first to
read the report out of sequence and then, if I am caught by a particular relevance, to
read it through from beginning to end.

When asked about the apparent contradiction that the drama evaluation
report apparently did not meet his criteria and yet it was proving to be the
catalyst for an extensive review of Mr. Ruby's course, Mr. Hazel gave two
reasons: first, he knew of my interest in the case study and so felt obligated
to persevere against his inclinations, and second, Mr Ruby had asked for his
assistance in revamping the framework of the drama course.

I think I might have missed the value of this if this had been given to me [with no
other follow-up]. If this were in a journal, I'm not sure I would have pursued it to the
degree I have pursued it because there was a task associated with it. And I would have
been the loser in that because I would have missed a clear direction that we got from
this report.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE USE OF CASE-STUDY EVALUATIONS

Lately, evaluators have paid much attention to ensuring that their reports
make a difference. Evaluators understand that clients are not "empty vessels";
they have a repertoire of interpretation skills and habits to use in reconciling the report with their current working knowledge. One of the powerful mediating forces between the evidence and the working knowledge is the truth, in its different forms, that the participant feels the evidence contains. "Knowledge is always potentially useful. All that is required is that humans find it sufficiently convincing to incorporate it into their personal modes of knowing and valuing."13

In Nicholas Maxwell's terms, the consumers are pursuing wisdom by using knowledge to guide them. Maxwell sharpens the distinction between knowledge and wisdom by showing that wisdom is the knowledge derived from inquiry, which is expanded as people use it in human settings:

If inquiry is to help us realize what is of value, it must attend to our feelings and desires. The very articulation of problems of living requires the expression of feelings and desires. According to the philosophy of wisdom, in fact, reason—rational action—is essentially so inter-relating action, experience, feeling, desire, aim, imagination and doubt that we give ourselves the best chances, other things being equal, of realizing what is of value.14

The participants in this study used knowledge to gain wisdom—but not the knowledge they themselves had acquired directly. Rather, they used the knowledge that had come to them after a process of distillation by a researcher who had tried to reflect the reality of the participants' situation. For participants to accept and act on the knowledge of a situation, as understood by the evaluator (or researcher), the imprimatur of truth is important. By understanding more deeply how participants in case-study evaluations assess truth, we will gain a deeper understanding of how case-study evaluations should be reported so that they can better achieve their aim of bringing about change.

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Reassessment and renewal in teaching is the theme of this collection of 16 articles. Contributors include the editors, Dwayne Huebner, Philip Jackson, Michael Apple, Dorothy Strickland, Maxine Greene, Louise Berman, and others. Most of the articles were first presented at Summer Institutes on Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, on teaching as a vocation, public policy issues, the curriculum, and personal choice.
