

# Neither to Praise nor to Bury—Simply to Remember? In Memory of Michael Scriven

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Michael Scriven was and will remain, for me, a puzzle. I cannot square the circle of how someone who made such a profound contribution to the field of evaluation, and to policy evaluation in particular, could presume to develop evaluation as an independent discipline. Similarly, I question the logic that led him to conflate evaluation with assessment in the field of education (although this conflation now seems widespread across a number of disciplines). This quandary aside, for now, I remember him as a robust interlocutor on the subject of evaluation who was ever willing to engage in a grown-up debate on the subject.

I was privileged to meet Michael at the annual American Evaluation Association conferences at the turn of the century in the early 2000s. I communicated with him for some years and took part in his debates and discussion on the now defunct EvalTalk. I experienced him as a shy, shambling, modest if not self-effacing man who seemed somewhat socially awkward and who valued his personal relationships. His far-reaching perspicacity was well evidenced when, in one of his workshops, I piped up that there could be no real objectivity. Pacing up and down, he proceeded to explain how objectivity can be present in relative terms in relation to the consensual context in which it is being exercised. This was typical of Scriven, at least when I knew him; his ability and willingness to determine the relevant nature of the object and the positions that could be taken in relation to the object—and to explain this in either simple or complex terms without cutting corners.

Unlike many of his peers and contemporaries, Scriven's views and interests were broad ranging. In a sense he epitomized exactly what an evaluator needs to be: a bricoleur.

This willingness to engage with varieties of views seems to have baffled his critics at times. For example, William Trochim (1998) attempted to rephrase and reframe Scriven's (1998) argument for a minimalist theory in practice. In doing so Trochim resorted to familiar social science objects. This, it seems to me, deviated substantially from Scriven's simple point, which has been put in familiar lay terms in other fields: You don't need to know anything about how a car engine works in order to drive a car, and you may know everything about how a car engine works without being able to drive. The argument made by Scriven is conjugate to the practice of goal-free evaluation (Scriven, 1991), known colloquially as brown bag evaluation. Namely, you don't need to know the goal(s) of a policy in order to evaluate it. And at times it may be *beneficial* not to know the goal(s) of the policy being evaluated.

Michael Scriven will be remembered as, and for, many things. He will be remembered as a polymath, a tireless pioneer, and a founder of modern-day evaluation in a number of policy arenas, along with practical applications. He will be remembered for his long list of contributions to the field, including his *Evaluation Thesaurus* (1991) and evaluation checklist, his formulation of the logic of evaluation and formative, summative, and meta-evaluation—and more besides. Perhaps most importantly for the field, he will be remembered for his argument determining evaluation per se as transdisciplinary and therefore requiring evaluation to become a discipline. It is here that we reach both a point of departure and a puzzle, as previously noted.

It is a point of departure in that evaluation per se can never be a discipline by Scriven's own understanding. The puzzle lies in how Scriven yet

argued for evaluation to become a discipline while holding the position given previously (Scriven, 1998). I have attempted to resolve this puzzle many times without success and hold, or held, an opposing view: Evaluation cannot be a discipline per se, but it is by default a transdiscipline if we take that to mean that evaluation permeates through all disciplines rather than “sits above” all disciplines. Scriven, however, is not to be outdone on this topic (Scriven, 2008) and his arguments speak as loudly today as they ever did. At this point I have to say I am sitting on the fence and trying not to wobble.

The opportunity to resolve the puzzle of evaluation as an independent discipline with Scriven in person has now passed. His work continues to be foundational, whether we choose to agree or disagree with the argument that evaluation is a transdiscipline and a discipline in its own right. Yet I feel there are many discussions and debates to be had regarding Scriven’s body of work and the arguments made therein. Perhaps this debate can be opened up to critical voices in the interest of the practice of evaluation. It seems that would be a fitting legacy.

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