

# The Passing of a Giant and a Critical Friend: Michael Scriven

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Michael was a big man—larger than life. His accomplishments were like an ocean—both deep and wide. A few of the most significant include:

- building foundations of evaluation theory
- institutionalizing formative and summative evaluation
- developing goal-free evaluation
- contributing to critical thinking in evaluation
- advocating for a transdisciplinary discipline.

## Debating

Fundamentally, however, one of his greatest contributions was his ability to debate. We argued (sorry—I mean debated) whenever we got together. He loved it. He lived for it. We would engage in print, other times on stage at professional meetings, and often at AEA socials.



Michael Scriven, Michael Quinn Patton, and David Fetterman  
Stewart Donaldson Organized the Claremont Graduate University debate, 2010

We rarely agreed about anything. I remember one time we argued throughout an entire social at AEA. He argued that we should not get too close to people for fear of contamination or bias in the

evaluation. I believe that to conduct an evaluation we must get close to people to understand what they think and how they act. He thought the evaluator's view of reality reigned, and I argued it

was critical to elicit the insider's view of reality to understand and predict behavior (Fetterman, 2020, p. 27)

To our astonishment (and embarrassment) we looked up in the middle of our exchange to see the room was empty. We had not even noticed that everyone was gone. We were lost in a bubble of contrasting and confounding ideas and positions.

### *Journals*

I should note these same arguments spilled over into the literature as well (Fetterman, 1997, 2005b; Scriven, 1997, 2017).

We sparred in our famous and somewhat explosive articles in the *American Journal of Evaluation and Evaluation and Program Planning*. Michael was never known to limit his remarks to the scope of the task in our exchanges. As he explained in his critique of the first edition of my book *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-Assessment and Accountability* (1996), "What began as a book review has thus been somewhat enlarged in scope to become a review and critique of a movement that is now an important part of the evaluation scene" (Scriven, 1997, 165).

Where do you begin with a massive critique of the approach when the task is to respond to a book review? What else could you do but systematically and methodically reply to every comment? Diplomatically and with civility, I responded. He cherished this battle of the wits.

For example, as you can see from his initial launch into the "book review," he called empowerment evaluation a "movement" (which was not meant as a compliment). He used the term to suggest that it was a mass following rather than another form of systematic inquiry, judgment, and action. He also concluded it was a movement because it had spread across the globe in a relatively short period of time. I, as usual, disagreed with him. I felt he had misinterpreted the data. Empowerment evaluation was just a concept that was in the right place at the right time. The Internet helped disseminate the approach exponentially.

My response was simple and direct:

Some colleagues have viewed empowerment evaluation, sometimes fearfully, as a worldwide "movement." This is an understandable reaction, given the pace and scope of adoption by governments, foundations, and academe. I understand that

this characterization does pay indirect tribute to the widespread interest in this new evaluation approach. However, empowerment evaluation remains simply one of many useful evaluation approaches in use throughout the world. The commitment and enthusiasm associated with this new approach is a function of both the level of engagement required to conduct this kind of effort and the rich, rewarding environment it creates. It is a constructive force designed to help people help themselves using evaluation as a tool, and it establishes a dynamic, evaluative community of learners. (Fetterman, 2001, p. 119)

He relished the exchange. We continued the tennis game—lobbing critiques, matching point by point.

When he called empowerment evaluation a form of professional development rather than evaluation, I did not agree with his assumptions and felt compelled to respond. He assumed empowerment evaluation could only be conducted by the "evaluator." This was incorrect. The approach, by design, is conducted by staff and community members, guided by an empowerment evaluator or critical friend.

I also felt compelled to point out he was excluding time-honored self-evaluation approaches in the field with his sweeping dismissals:

Scriven takes aim at EE, in part because it falls under the conceptual umbrella of self-evaluation. In broad strokes, Scriven excludes many evaluators, organizational development strategists, and consumers from the evaluation community by assuming an anti-self-evaluation position. The book's contributors and I do not agree with his critique because we do not agree with his core assumptions. We believe in the value of self-evaluation, which has a time-honored role in organizational life, including comprehensive institutional self-examinations, such as institutional accreditation self-studies and internal audits. (Fetterman, 2005b, p. 419)

There was no end to our arguments (sorry—our dialogue, exchange, and discussion). He never backed away from a fight. He reveled in these verbal and intellectual gymnastics.

### *Panels*

I organized a series of AEA panels and invited Michael to serve as our discussant. On one of our early panels, he was emphatic that empowerment evaluation was not evaluation. He did not think that people could (or that we should let them) evaluate their own programs. He considered it amateurish evaluation at best. I, of course, disagreed.

I think people close to a program are in the best position to conduct their own evaluation, with the assistance/guidance of a critical friend or empowerment evaluator. In fact, I believe they are more critical, because they want their programs to work. I also believe in evaluation capacity building to produce meaningful outcomes and enhance sustainability. He was not persuaded.

In any case, I had just finished highlighting our accomplishments in this panel, ranging from helping to bridge the digital divide in communities of color to helping schools transition from academic distress to academic success (Fetterman, 2005a, p. 92-122). It was a heady time. Empowerment evaluation was working. We had powerful case examples. We invited Michael to challenge us in part because we were confident about our work, but we also honestly believed in the value of critique to help us learn how to refine and improve our practice.

*I Gotcha.* It was Michael's turn to present his remarks, but before I concluded my remarks I asked if he might indulge me with a quotation from my latest book at the time (*Foundations of Empowerment Evaluation*). I wanted to share it with everyone in the audience to add a little emphasis to my position and presentation. He nodded in agreement.

I read, "Devolving some of the responsibility for evaluation is good. A program whose staff are not doing reasonably good evaluation of their own program is incompetently staffed, at some or all levels."

It was his turn to respond to my position statement. However, before I sat down, I said, "Oh yes, and the author of that statement, let me see—" (as I looked over the page in my book) "—is, I think, Michael Scriven" (1997, p. 174). It was hilarious. I got him. He just put his hands on his head and put his head down on the table. It was a gem and classic Michael, in one of those rare occasions where he had been had.

For those who remember those days, never fear: He got me plenty of times (that's what made the moment sweet).

*Not Good Evaluation.* Marv Alkin organized a panel at AERA with Michael Scriven, Michael Patton, and me. He asked Scriven if he thought empowerment evaluation was a form of evaluation. Marv was a provocateur. He knew Scriven's consistent position had been that empowerment evaluation was not a form of evaluation—possibly a form of evaluation training, but that's it. Little did Marv know, Scriven had made a significant shift in his thinking. Scriven replied, "Yes, I think empowerment evaluation is a form of evaluation." Marv almost fell out of his chair. I was thrilled. What a victory! Scriven had come around.

As I walked out of the room Michael Patton put his arm around me and said, "David, don't let it go to your head. He didn't say it was *good* evaluation." Good point. Michael was right. We had overcome one hurdle, but there was a long way to go before we would convince him of its real value and contribution to the field.

*Boxing Gloves.* We argued so much that one time some of our colleagues tried to get us to wear boxing gloves (just for fun). They knew it would make for good theater. They knew that when they put us together on stage, the event would be entertaining and a well-attended battle. I admit, I am glad they were not able to find the gloves, because I am not confident he might not have taken a literal swing at me in the heat of the moment instead of his typical intellectual jabs and left hook. He was a very big man.

## Critical Friend vs. Critical Enemy

I applauded Michael for being immersed in our conceptual issues. He was obviously reading our work and thinking deeply about it. At one session together he spontaneously recommended that we change the term "critical friend" to "critical enemy" (which he put in writing later in our exchanges):

A powerful and possibly unique (in practice) level of the ethical and pragmatic use of meta-evaluation. I try to match David on this, and indeed advocate to David on this, by going further than his enthusiasms for the use of the "critical friend" to the use of "critical enemy" but am less successful. However, I never think of empirical evaluation without reflecting on his inspirational example of treating his critics as friends—and not just friends but helpers—as they indeed are. The

connection between us is close because we are both part of that small group who really believe that proposition and act on it.

To us this meant he was grappling with the issues we were proposing. He was also trying to integrate our conception of a critical friend into his worldview. Of course, once again, while I fully acknowledged and valued our connection, we still disagreed. I told him that, while I appreciated the suggestion, it did not work. In an email, I wrote:

I understand your preference for the term critical enemy and view this as one interpretation of the antagonist. I, however, prefer critical friend because it connotes a constructive intentionality. A critical friend is honest. They tell you what matters instead of trying to simply score points. A critical friend is more critical about program performance because they want to see the program perform and produce stated outcomes.

An enemy launches an assault under the guise of a critique with no intention to refine, improve, or illuminate. An enemy's critique diverts limited resources adding more heat than light.

I think of you as a critical friend (not a critical enemy). While we disagree at times, I think our conversations have shed light on: 1) The role of the critical friend in an evaluation and 2) The multiple roles and purposes evaluation can play in society, e.g. development, accountability, and knowledge.

Always good to hear from you to exchange ideas and even an occasional friendly nod across the net.

In essence, I felt that a critical friend lets you know if your fly is down or you have a milk

mustache; a critical enemy lets you walk into the room without warning, leaving you with egg on your face.

## Much to Admire

Scriven, despite his continual critique, always communicated his appreciation for our openness to debate and inquiry. He valued our efforts to share both sides of the argument with colleagues around the world:

In response to my request for permission to place his critique on the Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation TIG home page, Scriven responded, "... sure, post it and congratulations for doing so: it's in the best spirit of evaluation (not to mention science)! (Fetterman, 1997, pg. 254)

During the AEA 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of Empowerment Evaluation session, we invited Michael, along with Marv Alkin, Michael Patton, and Steward Donaldson, to comment on our work, including our latest work in our second edition of *Empowerment Evaluation* (2015).<sup>1</sup> His remarks, along with those of the rest of the panel, were published in *Evaluation and Program Planning* (2017).

He opened his remarks with the statement, "There is much to admire about empowerment evaluation" (Scriven, 2017, para. 1). He admired our approach to inviting critique and learning from it.

It seemed we were finally in complete agreement. But we waited for the other shoe to drop, which we had become accustomed to with Michael: first the compliment and then the best shot at a knockout punch. But there was no second shoe to drop. Abe (Wandersman) and I almost fell out of our seats. He even put it in print. This time he caught us completely off guard.

<sup>1</sup> "Scriven wrote that the book is "full of good things: interesting case studies, a hundred suggestions and lines of thought worth considering by beginners and professionals alike. I didn't say that I wanted David to

review my next book just so he could get even; he's a very smart evaluator and I'll learn from him. Read this book and you'll learn a lot from him and his co-editor and co-authors" (2005, pg. 417).



21<sup>st</sup> Empowerment Evaluation Anniversary AEA panel speakers (2017):  
Michael Scriven, Marvin Alkin, Abraham Wandersman, Stewart Donaldson, and David Fetterman  
(Michael Patton's comments were pre-recorded.)



Michael Scriven at 21<sup>st</sup> Empowerment Evaluation Anniversary AEA panel

## Antagonist Is Our Friend

I know many people did not like Michael's style of argumentation. To those colleagues: We understand. He was, in many ways, an acquired taste. But he helped us refine our conceptual clarity and methodological sophistication. He even, if inadvertently, helped us solidifying our ongoing and steadfast commitment to issues of social justice.<sup>2</sup> I think of Edmund Burke's quotation when I think of Michael: "He (she) that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skills. Our antagonist is our helper" (1790, pg. 195).

At the end of almost every panel discussion and publication, however harsh, Michael said he hoped we would still be friends. He would often conclude our communications with the following salutation:

So, with all due respect and indeed affection,  
I remain,  
Yours sincerely,  
A critical friend.  
Michael Scriven

I always assured him that despite the heat of the moment (of which there were many), we still remained friends, even though we rarely agreed on anything except for our belief in the value and worth of evaluation.

Michael will cast a mammoth shadow, long after his candle has burned out.

So long, Michael. Your critical friend.  
David

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<sup>2</sup> See Fetterman, D.M. (2023). *Empowerment Evaluation and Social Justice: Confronting the Culture of Silence*. New York: Guilford Press.