Being an Evaluator: Your Practical Guide to Evaluation

By Podems, D. R. (2019). New York: Guilford Press

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The evaluation textbooks that broadly lay out many of the theoretical and applied aspects of the evaluation discipline do a fine job of describing evaluation functions and structures (e.g., Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011; Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000; Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Rossi, Lipsey, & Henry, 2019; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). Most are written for a rather erudite audience that presupposes certain experience and knowledge and an alacrity with a rather didactic presentation (e.g., Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). Rarely, though, do they engage you in a conversation and invite you to interact with the content they impart. Not so with this book; Donna Podems has a wealth of experience and easily engages the reader in an exploration of the field with appropriately attenuated aplomb and generously sprinkled humor.

While other books that serve to inform the discipline vary on how descriptive or prescriptive they are, Donna seems even-handed between description and prescription. She provides broad definition of the field, describing practice in friendly ways, and spends a good deal of time translating her experience into practical and prescriptive lessons. She intends, and succeeds at, "demystifying" evaluation practice and exploring what it means to be an evaluator, focusing mostly on the more novice evaluator. She also hopes to provide useful information to the more advanced evaluator and those who might engage with evaluators, such as commissioners or managers. This is a rather broad audience and a big ask of any book. While I do not represent all the intended audiences, I can see how her use of numerous examples would give most any conceivable reader value by extrapolating these examples to their own experience. Though she implies it took her only five years to write this book, there is evidence of many years of experience from both Donna and an expansive circle of colleagues that give this book great depth beyond the years it took to write.

Donna Podems is an internationally recognized evaluator and leader in the evaluation field. She has published multiple papers and chapters on evaluation, including editing the book Democratic Evaluation and Democracy (2017). She has held leadership positions in multiple Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs); she is currently leading the IOCE working group on evaluation professionalization, focusing on making professionalizing efforts transparent to the community. Donna was a research fellow at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, and she is currently an Assistant Professor at Michigan State University and research fellow at the University of Johannesburg. She holds a doctorate in interdisciplinary studies focused on Program Evaluation and Organizational Development, and a master's degree in Public Administration. She has worked with a range of clients, including governments, civil society, nongovernmental groups, international donors, and foundations in Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. Dr. Podems also practices evaluation as the Director of OtherWISE Research and Evaluation, a woman-owned firm based in Cape Town, South Africa.

Being an Evaluator is organized into two parts comprising 17 chapters that take the evaluator (or the professional interested in evaluation) on a

journey from building an evaluation to working and researching in the evaluation discipline. Part 1 is titled "doing evaluation and thinking evaluatively" and Part II is titled "working as an evaluator and exploring evaluation". She recognizes the iterative nature of this journey, so while the chapters are laid out in rather linear order, she sends you forward or backward to gather more information as you might need it. If you follow the many forward and backward references, sending the reader to deeper or different discussions on most topics across the pages, you could conceivably start this book in most any chapter and will likely still read the entire book, at least once.

Part I guides the reader through the process of articulating the evaluation itself, grounded in the need to clearly define the evaluand, its logic and its language, to understand if it is an evaluable intervention. This reflects an understanding that evaluation is only as good as the evaluand and one cannot really do the critical business of evaluating unless the evaluand is well defined, either before or as a result of the evaluation process. The first two chapters set the stage by focusing on the language of evaluation (Ch. 1) and the crucial differentiating definitions of evaluator and researcher (Ch. 2). The journey then winds through initiating the evaluation and identifying what the evaluand is and what problems are being addressed (Ch. 3). Here she introduces the idea of "pocket problems" and "grand problems", where pocket problems are more directly assailable and grand problems are more distal and less likely to be direct results of an intervention. This framing is useful as she covers later topics (e.g., results in chapter 7) and is an example of the many frameworks she applies throughout the text. The next few chapters take the reader further into the logic discussion by speaking to topics of epistemology (Ch. 4), data collection options and data credibility issues (Ch. 5), linking problem statements to results (Ch. 6), understanding results (Ch. 7), evaluand logic (Ch. 8), and designing, assessing, and evaluating progress towards indicators (Ch. 9). When the pocket results that lead to grand results are defined, one "pulls it all together" in chapter 10, rounding out Part I, with a sorting "Baby Game" that evaluators can use to engage program staff in working through the issues identified in chapters 1–9.

In Part II, Donna moves away from the functional aspects of "evaluating" and spends seven chapters covering what it means to be an evaluator and exploring evaluation as a discipline. Chapter 11, "the personal choices of being an evaluator" asks the reader to consider what sort of evaluator one wants to be and: "what role should evaluation play in society, if any?" The questions she poses in this chapter are central to our identity and it is a chapter almost all evaluators would benefit from reading. She covers important concepts such as evaluator roles as educator, facilitator, and negotiator; identifying as a sector specialist vs. a sector generalist; internal vs. external evaluator; and summative, formative, and developmental evaluators. Chapters 12 and 13 fit nicely together as she covers values, valuing, ethics, and principles in the former and power, politics, culture, language, and context in the latter. These cover a wide range of considerations and point the reader to numerous resources where one can indulge each to their fullest appetite. Likewise, the following two chapters (14 & 15) fit together as the scholarly side of evaluation. Chapter 14 pulls the reader into thinking about thinking about evaluation, followed by a hefty chapter on navigating the maze of evaluation choices (Ch. 15) touching on the rather dense area of evaluation "theory/approaches/models". The final two chapters (16 &17) cover a couple of more challenging topics of our work. Making (or not) recommendations is a debated topic in the field (as are many of the pieces she covers throughout the book) and Donna nicely lays out the various arguments for and against them. In her experience, rarely is an evaluation commissioned that doesn't expect a recommendation. The difficulties and challenges of bringing recommendations is the crux of chapter 16. In chapter 17, the final chapter brings us back to reality with a discussion of the various ways evaluation can go wrong, and ways to think about surviving these dilemmas. If you are like me and find this section to be of utmost interest, I recommend picking up Thomas Schwandt's recent (2015) *Evaluation Foundations Revisited: Cultivating a Life of the Mind for Practice.* He explores many of the issues Donna touches on, but with the depth of an evaluation science philosopher.

As the book closes out with a light epilogue to remind us of the stories she wove, we are left with a tidy package, albeit with a lot of twists, turns, and switchbacks; But I surmise we are left better than we started because we have been provided with a multitude of stories and examples of how evaluation could be practiced, by someone who seems approachable, aware of her own place in the pantheon of evaluation, and who has stepped up to the plate to provide us a window into her experience.

There are many things to like about this book. For instance, she uses not just icons to highlight

different subsections in the book, but she also slightly shifts her language so that you are reminded that this is intended to be "a moment" in the book and that you might "pay more attention here" (e.g., p. 257 "Psst. Over here. I have a tiny trade secret to share…"). Along those lines, pith and whit abound. For example, when moving into talking about her "big five factors" that influence all evaluations (so that all evaluators should attend to them, i.e., power, politics, culture, language, and values) she says: "We start by addressing the concept of power because I am writing the book and I have the power to decide that." (p. 259)

Throughout the text, Donna provides easily relatable examples (e.g., a barking dog example on page 63 used to discuss direct and indirect beneficiaries) and practical and useful frameworks (e.g., practical, use, and technical factors inform the question of what to assess, pp. 176–181). Her voice is clear throughout. Donna uses easily digestible language that sounds like she is speaking right onto the page. I have had a number of conversations with Donna through the years and as I read this book, I heard her voice clearly.

Also helpful are guiding components dropped in to help explicate certain concepts or terms: "trade secrets" and "secrets", "interludes", "activities or things to do", "advice", "suggested resources", "clarifying questions", and "practical conversations" from her experience are all communication tools that she ably applies throughout the text. One favorite tool for me is the scaled "for further reading" sections: she lists a number of resources that depend upon how much time you have, they range from "a few minutes" to "a few nights a week for months" and they include everything from a blog series on a personal website to published books and YouTube videos.

I know that it is expected that a review such as this should also identify any weaknesses found, and this was difficult. I appreciated so much about this book, it was difficult to bring such a judgment to bear. That said, I shall point out two things that I would likely recommend changing in a second edition. I would, perhaps, direct new evaluators to first read parts of the second half, to set their identity thinking in motion, before I let them engage in most of the components of the first part (except for the first two chapters; they stand on their own as valuable for every reader, no matter the experience level). For instance, the two questions laid in at page 228 in chapter 11 could be used to set the stage for the whole book: "What role should evaluation play in society, if any? And "Through being an evaluator, do you want to play a role in social change? If so, how? If not, what makes

you say that? I would posit these questions to any evaluator early in their journey into the discipline. Getting them to think about these questions at the outset of this book would inform the cognitive structures that are created when they digest the rest of the book.

The other point I would make is that she takes on very complex topics but does not take the reader too far into them (this is not surprising; this book covers a lot of ground in only 348 pages and one can only include so many concepts in such a space). For instance, she has the sense not to take on a deep discussion of evaluation approaches/theories/models, and chooses to instead make brief descriptions of a few key approaches: utilization-focused, democratic, feminist, responsive, theory=driven, realist, CIPP model, appreciative inquiry, principles-focused, RCT. As a bargain for this shallow dive, she refers you to the "experts" by providing a plethora of good resources for further research. This relative shallowness is more of an issue that informs the audience of the book, not necessarily in a shortcoming of the text, per se. While I think novice to experienced evaluators will find useful pieces in this book, the experienced evaluator might come up wanting if looking for detailed answers to deep evaluation practice or theory issues. That being said, if you are looking for examples to deepen your own thinking about the why, how, what, when, and where of evaluation, you will find much to appreciate.

Often, Donna makes the comment that evaluation is messy, and it can be. A book like this cannot ever fully explicate all an evaluator will encounter. Given that caveat, Dr. Podems deftly uses stories from the field, friendly insider secrets, a consistent evaluand as an example, and other well-applied storytelling mechanisms to make the endeavor less mysterious. The novice and experienced evaluator will find purchase with the examples she leverages to make evaluation more accessible.

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