

Canadian Evaluation Society Tribute to Dr. Michael Scriven¹



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With a great sense of loss, the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) wishes to inform you that Dr. Michael Scriven has passed away. For over 60 years, Dr. Scriven helped to build the foundations of the evaluation field and shape it into the discipline and profession that it is today. He also educated and guided several generations of new evaluators.

After earning his doctorate at Oxford, Scriven worked as a university professor and evaluator, primarily in Australia and the United States. He served as president of the Evaluation Network (ENet), the American Evaluation Association (AEA) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Much is written elsewhere that documents Michael Scriven's many achievements, so CES would like to briefly acknowledge some of his specific influences on evaluation in Canada.

Language to Better Understand Terms and Concepts in the Evaluation Field

For more than three decades, the CES essential skills series of courses has conveyed basic knowledge and skills about program evaluation to persons new to the evaluation field. The first learning objective is to explain essential evaluation terms and concepts. In common with the leading textbooks in evaluation, the course begins this conversation with Scriven's definition of evaluation as the process of determining the

merit, worth, and value of something, and evaluations as the products of that process. The course then compares Scriven's definition of evaluation to a variety of other definitions, leading to thoughtful and lively discussions. Throughout the course, participants learn terms and concepts originated by Michael Scriven, such as evaluand, unintended consequences, evaluation paradigms and approaches, pseudoevaluations, and the difference between formative and summative evaluation. You are encouraged to review the range of terms and concepts that have defined the evaluation field by referring to Scriven's *Evaluation Thesaurus* (1991).

Evaluative Thinking and Thinking Critically about Our Evaluation Paradigms

Scriven first described the steps of evaluation reasoning in his book *The Logic of Evaluation* (1981). Over time, the evaluation field has recognized these concepts as the basis for *evaluative thinking*.

Michael Scriven applied evaluative thinking to the *critical appraisal of our evaluation paradigms*. For example, in the 1970s, there was a strong movement to institute goal-based evaluation as the primary paradigm in the United States and Canada. This was to be a unified evaluation system that assessed program outcomes in terms of the attainment of intended

¹ During his long career, Dr. Michael Scriven made significant contributions to building the evaluation profession in Canada. The Canadian Evaluation Society recognized Dr. Scriven with an In Memoriam sent in the CES Newsletter to all CES members on September 25, 2023. This article contains the substantive content of the tribute to Michael Scriven by the Canadian Evaluation Society.

goals as measured on a common scale. Michael Scriven strongly opposed equating program evaluation with the measurement of goal attainment, because it was too narrow, distorted the nature of evaluation, and ignored unintended consequences. Instead, he proposed goal-free evaluation that involved a comprehensive evaluation of program outcomes by independent evaluators of the program as implemented, rather than of goals as planned.

Over the years, Michael Scriven participated in many debates about other evaluation paradigms and issues, including the purposes of evaluation, rendering evaluative judgments, the limitations of quantitative methods, the application of qualitative approaches, the importance and limitations of evaluation use, and the validity of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) for program evaluation. He was a strong advocate for methodological pluralism rather than orthodoxy or rigidity. He saw evaluation as an ethical enterprise and an important way to promote justice.

These debates demanded attention from evaluators, and they usually generated much heat. Scriven's commanding stature, his powerful voice, his arguments firmly based in logic, and his provocative comments about the shibboleths of evaluation drew crowds that filled rooms and overflowed into hallways. Janitors and service staff would stop their work and listen to him debate, even though they were unlikely to know anything about evaluation. As a debater, Michael Scriven had few equals.

A New Vision of the Evaluation Field and of Ourselves as Evaluators

Evaluation as a discipline has a low profile—it has been called a “best-kept secret” as a field of practice. In Canada, evaluators like to say that we are team players and should not draw too much attention to ourselves. Evaluators in Australasia complain that they suffer from “tall poppy syndrome.” They maintain a low profile, because any poppy that grows too tall or commands too much attention is quickly cut to size. In contrast, Scriven encouraged evaluators to have a new vision of ourselves and to grow tall and flourish.

Rather than viewing evaluation as an obscure young tentatively emerging discipline, Scriven offered the bold vision of evaluation as a transdiscipline and a trans-science; that is, a discipline that, like logic and statistics, applies to and is used as a methodological tool in many

other disciplines. Through the ages, Western civilization crowned first theology, then physical sciences, and then mathematics as Queen of the Sciences. For Michael Scriven, evaluation rightfully occupied that position. He saw professional evaluators as the courtiers and emissaries of Queen Evaluation. To promote his vision for evaluation, Scriven became the cofounder and editor of the open-access, online *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*.

Through his debates and his numerous publications, Scriven helped us develop a sharper vision of the evaluation field, the roles of evaluators, and the knowledge and competencies required to be effective and confident evaluators. In so doing, Dr. Scriven contributed in developing the foundation for the CES Professional Development Program (PDP) and the Credentialed Evaluator (CE) designation that we value so much today (Love, 2015).

Inspiration and Nurturing for the Next Generation of Evaluators

Dr. Michael Scriven was a university professor and a gifted teacher and mentor to several generations of evaluators. He was greatly respected by students of evaluation in many fields of practice. At evaluation conferences, one would often find Michael Scriven having lunch or dinner at a nearby restaurant surrounded by throngs of graduate students. It was not unusual to find 20 to 30 students with tables pushed together surrounding him and hanging on to his every word as he answered their questions and discussed evaluation with them hour after hour.

As part of his dedication to students, he inaugurated the Michael Scriven Dissertation Award for Outstanding Contribution to Evaluation Theory, Methodology or Practice.

From the CES perspective, it is noteworthy that the first recipient (in 2007) of the Scriven Award was Kim van der Woerd. Kim is a proud member of the 'Namgis Nation. Her dissertation for her PhD in psychology at Simon Fraser University focused on a comprehensive participatory evaluation of a federally funded First Nations substance abuse treatment center.

Prior to his death, as a professor at Claremont Graduate University and codirector of the Claremont Evaluation Center, Michael Scriven founded and endowed the nonprofit Faster Forward Fund for accelerating the theory, practice, and profession of evaluation.

Final Comments

Few persons have had as much impact on evaluation theory and practices as Michael Scriven. If you would like to learn more, a good source is Stewart Donaldson's *The Future of Evaluation in Society: A Tribute to Michael Scriven* (2013). To honor his passing, numerous tributes, videos, reading lists, and Michael Scriven's own articles are readily available online.

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