Book Review

An Introduction to Program Evaluation: Basic Concepts and Example Cases

Richard M. Jones
La Vergne, TN: Lighting Source (Ingram) Books Inc., 2016

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Introductory texts on program evaluation are in no short supply today. From tome-like textbooks to online primers, students of evaluation have many options. Despite their availability, their usefulness to students—particularly, the novice—may be limiting. Many introductory texts broach the subject from a technical standpoint, failing to acknowledge the interpersonal and ethical dimensions of evaluation practice. Few bring to life the complexity of the evaluation as it is practiced in context. And, many err on the side of being comprehensive, at the cost of being comprehensible to the novice. An introductory text that satisfies the needs of the novice is hard to come by.

In an apparent attempt to remedy the situation, Richard Jones sets out on an ambitious task of writing yet another introductory text on program evaluation in his book, An *Introduction to Program Evaluation: Basic Concepts and Example Cases* (2016). The book "is meant to be a plain-language, supplementary resource for students of introductory, post-secondary courses on program evaluation, those who are relative novices in evaluation who wish to conduct or commission program evaluation work, and stakeholders of program evaluation studies" (back cover). To that end, he succeeds at his goal. In reading this introductory text, the reader acquires a basic but sufficient understanding of evaluation theory and practice.

The book proceeds logically and introduces evaluation concepts at appropriate depths. It is organized in two distinct parts. The first half of the book (chapters 1–4) introduces the theoretical foundation of program evaluation. The second half of the book (chapters 5–14) presents a series of case examples to illustrate evaluation concepts Jones introduces in the preceding chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the basic and usual concepts of program evaluation. Jones defines program evaluation and identifies the various purposes for the evaluation of programs. He then provides a nuanced interpretation of the concept of program evaluation by comparing informal evaluation to formal evaluation, introducing the formative-summative distinction, and contrasting internal evaluation from external evaluation. He closes by discussing the potential value and limitations of evaluation. Effectively, this chapter lays out the landscape of evaluation and sets the stage for further discussion.

Chapter 2 marks a departure from the usual strategy of expounding foundational concepts from other introductory texts and directly addresses issues of quality in evaluation. Jones argues "standards of best practice and ethical behaviour must be addressed if program evaluations are

to be useful and worthwhile and if the interests of all those involved in or affected by program evaluations are to be safeguarded" (p. 26). He refers to the American Evaluation Association's Guiding *Principles for Evaluators* (2004) and the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation's Program *Evaluation Standards* (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). While the discussion is brief, the reader is left with an impression that evaluation is fundamentally an applied practice and that such practice ought to be grounded in ethics and judgments.

Chapter 3 introduces various approaches to program evaluation. This chapter is perhaps the most conceptual of the others. The usual models and approaches are covered in a blitz format: objectives-oriented evaluation, needs assessment, context-input-process-product, and goal-free evaluation, to name a few. The reader is left with the impression of the multiple ways in which an evaluation may be focused to address the needs of the audience.

Chapter 4 discusses the process of conducting an evaluation. Jones provides a six-step process in which the evaluator identifies the objectives and purposes of the evaluation, assesses its context, develops the plan for conducting the evaluation, gathers data and information, analyzes and interprets data and information, and finally, reports on the findings. At each step, Jones offers instructive points of consideration to the reader. This six-step process is generic enough to be compatible with most mainstream approaches to evaluation. Jones reinforces a point he makes in Chapter 2: that standards of practice and ethics undergird all steps in the evaluation process.

The remaining half of the book, chapters 5–14, offers 10 cases to illustrate the various approaches Jones introduces in Chapter 3. All cases are drawn from those Jones had contributed to over his three decade long career as a program evaluator and educational assessment expert. Jones takes care to unpack each of the cases, outlining for the reader the context and circumstances that prompted the evaluation, and explaining how he and his colleagues approached and organized an evaluation in response. He closes each case with a meta-evaluation-like commentary on how evaluation standards and ethical considerations had been addressed. While a more diverse collection of cases may have been more valuable in scholarly terms, this collection of cases offers an interesting insight into one evaluator's career.

Jones's introductory text stands out for its conciseness. Only the most essential points are introduced; the reader is readily able to distinguish one concept from the next. The brevity does not come at a cost of rigour. The discussion is carefully referenced and grounded in contemporary evaluation literature. Jones provides key references to each of the concepts and approaches he introduces; the initiated reader is provided with a trail to follow should he/she wish to read more. The collection of example cases illustrates abstract evaluation approaches, bringing to life the practical decision-making skills and judgment that an evaluator must bring to an evaluation. Comprehensibility is supported by Jones's direct and simple writing style. Finally, the concepts are presented generically enough so not to advocate for particular orientations or stances in evaluation, as can be the case with some introductory texts. In these ways, Jones's text succeeds as an introductory text on the topic.

Despite its many merits, I find the text to have only exposed rudimentarily the complexity of evaluation. The book points to how evaluation may become complicated because of stakeholders or the context in which it takes place, or how standards of practice or ethics influence an evaluation, but it fails to show the reader the complexity in such matters over the course of conducting an evaluation. Given the intent of the text and audience, i.e., "relative novices in evaluation who wish to conduct or commission program evaluation work" (back cover), a deeper

treatment of the issues is warranted. The collection of case examples could have been the ideal place to do so. Problematizing some of the issues Jones has identified could have addressed this minor shortcoming. Another possible way to address this issue may be to include, as sidebar materials, probing questions inviting the readers to exercise their own judgments at key decision-points within an evaluation. I accept that writing an introductory text involves making tradeoffs, and so I suspect such features were likely omitted to keep the discussion simple and accessible.

On balance, Jones's text delivers on its promises of providing an introductory book on the subject of evaluation. I recommend this text for its simple and direct introduction of evaluation concepts. The cases serve an important pedagogical function in illustrating evaluation concepts and practice. Having recently reviewed introductory texts on evaluation for a course I was authoring, this combination of expository introduction and case examples is rare to find in one book. This is a good first-book for anyone wishing to become acquainted with the basics of program evaluation. I would recommend this book to novices, the book's intended audience. Included in this group are university and college students who require a grounding in evaluation, such as those enrolled in public administration programs, policy studies, education, public health, and nursing. However, students in specialist programs studying evaluation would likely outgrow this book quickly because of its coverage. Instructors of evaluation workshops and courses would also find value in this text.

References

American Evaluation Association (2004). *Guiding principles for evaluators*. Washington, DC: American Evaluation Association. Retrieved from http://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=51

Yarbrough, D. B., Shulha, L. M., Hopson, R. K., & Caruthers, F. A. (2011). *The program evaluation standards: A guide for evaluators and evaluation users* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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