In Tribute to Lyn Shulha: The Authentic Evaluator

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Abstract : *With great honour, I offer a modest commentary¹ on the articles in this special issue of the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, complemented by reflections on my decades of interactions with and memories of Lyn. My commentary underscores the enduring legacy of Lyn's significant contributions to the field of evaluation. These contributions largely, though not exclusively, reside in three domains: collaborative approaches to evaluation, the field's deep commitment to evaluation use, and the substance and contributions of meaningful standards for evaluation practice. My reflections honour Lyn's kindness, practical scholarship, integrity, and joyful engagement with the full richness of life.*

Keywords : *collaboration, evaluation standards, evaluation use, exemplary evaluation practice*

Résumé : *C'est un grand honneur pour moi d'offrir un modeste commentaire¹ sur les articles de ce numéro spécial de la Revue canadienne d'évaluation de programme, complété par une réflexion sur mes décennies d'interactions avec Lyn et mes souvenirs d'elle. Mon commentaire souligne l'héritage durable de ses importantes contributions au domaine de l'évaluation. Ces contributions sont largement liées, quoique non exclusivement, à trois domaines : les approches collaboratives à l'évaluation, l'engagement profond de la communauté d'évaluateurs pour favoriser l'utilisation de l'évaluation et l'élaboration de normes pour la pratique évaluative. Mes réflexions rendent hommage à la bonté de Lyn, à son expérience, à son intégrité et à son engagement toujours enthousiaste.*

Mots clés : *collaboration, normes de pratique en évaluation, utilisation de l'évaluation, pratique exemplaire de l'évaluation*

Professor, mentor, evaluator, colleague, and friend extraordinaire—this is the Lyn Shulha I have had the privilege of knowing for nigh on a quarter of a century. In this special journal issue honouring Lyn's career and her significant contributions to the field of evaluation, I will offer a few comments on the articles in this special issue, as connected to Lyn's work as an evaluation scholar and practitioner, and will also share my appreciation for Lyn as a colleague and a friend.

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LYN SHULHA'S EVALUATION LEGACY

Lyn Shulha's research and scholarship, her mentoring of students and novice researchers, her evaluation practice, and her exceptional service to the communities in which she resided cannot all be easily disentangled, one from the other. For Lyn the professional and Lyn the person are both fully present in all the spaces she inhabits and the activities in which she participates. Overall this "presence" is genuine, principled, committed to being of service and to being useful, and unfailingly upbeat. In her scholarship Lyn's presence is also one of commitment to and faith in the integrity and importance of the ideas being shared. Her work has concentrated in three interconnected areas: evaluation as a collaborative endeavour, usefulness as evaluation's primary *raison d'être*, and the contributions of clear and thoughtful standards to establish effective and defensible evaluation practice. In the sections that follow, snapshots of Lyn's contributions to evaluation scholarship in these three areas—both from selected literature and from the articles in this special issue—are presented.

Evaluation as a Collaborative Practice

Lyn Shulha has been engaged in research and reflection on evaluation as a collaborative endeavour almost since she entered the field. For Lyn, working collaboratively with key stakeholders in an evaluation context is just common sense. Moreover, a collaborative approach to evaluation advances a defensible set of values for the work of evaluators, including, for example, respect, contextual relevance, and shared decision making.

The article in this special issue of *CJPE* by Whitmore, al Hudib, Cousins, Gilbert, and Shulha, titled "Reflections on the Meanings of Success in Collaborative Approaches to Evaluation: Results of an Empirical Study," is a follow-up to a recently published article in the *American Journal of Evaluation*, "Introducing Evidence-Based Principles to Guide Collaborative Approaches to Evaluation: Results of an Empirical Process" (Shulha, Whitmore, Cousins, Gilbert, & al Hudib, 2016). These publications well represent Lyn's long-term scholarly engagement with the character and contributions of collaboration to evaluation quality and utility.

Shulha et al. (2016) introduced a set of eight evidence-based principles to "guide evaluation practice in contexts where evaluation knowledge is collaboratively produced by evaluators and stakeholders" (p. 193). As understood in this work, principles are envisioned as pragmatic tools that enable adaptation by the practitioner to varied contexts, rather than as theory-informed procedures to follow closely and with fidelity. For illustration, two of these principles are "Develop a shared understanding of the program" and "Promote evaluative thinking." The empirical or evidence base for these principles included two pilot studies, an online questionnaire with responses from 320 evaluation practitioners, and a follow-up "validation phase" with 58 of the survey respondents. The article in this issue of *CJPE* presents further analysis of the original data, specifically, responses to two open-ended items on the survey regarding respondent-selected "successful" and "unsuccessful" collaborative evaluations.²

Nine categories of responses were inductively generated from these data that directly addressed characteristics of successful and unsuccessful collaborative evaluations, again from the perspective of the collaborative evaluation practitioners. Two of the three sets of responses with the highest frequencies concerned relationships relevant to the evaluation context, specifically (a) relationships among stakeholders and (b) relationships between stakeholders and evaluators. Regarding stakeholder interrelationships, a collaborative approach to evaluation was reported to be facilitated by stakeholder agreement on key issues, stakeholder commitment to the evaluation process, and—perhaps enabling the other factors—active support for the evaluation from program management. Regarding relationships between the evaluators and stakeholders, one critical factor was (again) active support from the program management/leadership for stakeholder participation in evaluation activities. Strong and frequent communication between evaluators and stakeholders, and active stakeholder participation in evaluation activities were other dimensions of this evaluator-stakeholder relationship theme.

The third category with a high frequency of responses from the collaborative evaluator sample concerned the “alignment of evaluation purpose” with the priority information needs of the program community, along with frequent and clear communications toward shared understandings of the evaluative agenda and its intended contributions to the context. This alignment of evaluation purpose and stakeholder information needs is indeed central to collaborative evaluation, as the collaborating stakeholders include not just program leaders but also program developers and direct service staff.

These two studies well exemplify Lyn’s body of thoughtful research on a collaborative approach to evaluation and the considered and detailed findings that emanate from her research. Lyn’s work on a collaborative approach to evaluation has yielded significant and nuanced understanding of the meanings of collaboration in evaluation and of its potential as an engaged, interactive, and relational practice. Specifically, Lyn’s work has cultivated an understanding of collaboration that is neither formulaic nor captured in a 7- or 4- or 8-step process for attaining collaboration in evaluation, but rather is richly contextual and enacted importantly through relationships.

Moreover, with close colleagues Brad Cousins and Bessa Whitmore, Lyn also authored a strong and vitally important statement to the global evaluation community about the varied evaluation approaches that are resident within the evaluation genre that advocates for engagement of and collaboration with stakeholders in evaluation studies (Cousins, Whitmore, & Shulha, 2013).

We conclude with sentiments that the field would be best served by serious work to develop principles of practice that allow ample flexibility to do what seems best given diversity in stakeholder interests, contextual complexity, cultural diversity, evaluator-stakeholder relations, and the like. In short, collaborative inquiry in evaluation is about approaches that should remain dynamic and adaptable to the exigencies of the evaluation context. (p. 18)

Here! Here!

Evaluation Usefulness and Use

Lyn Shulha's scholarly and practical career in evaluation has also featured a deep dive into the critical domain of evaluation use. This is, of course, fully logical, as meaningful evaluation use can be advanced via respectful collaboration with evaluation stakeholders. It should be noted, as presented in the preceding section, that Lyn's valuing of collaboration extends well beyond its instrumental or conceptual contribution to evaluation use. In the domain of use, again partnering with fellow Canadian Brad Cousins, Lyn has made significant contributions (including [Cousins & Shulha, 2006](#); [Shulha & Cousins, 1997](#)), a legacy that is further represented in this special issue's article by Donnelly and Searle on "Optimizing Use in the Field of Program Evaluation by Integrating Learning from the Knowledge Field."

The domain of evaluation use is probably the most researched domain in our field, I may surmise, for two main reasons. First, the evaluation profession exists to provide a service in the form of meaningful information to others—policy makers, program leaders and staff, community activists, and other stakeholders—that is, we centrally aspire to be useful. So, of course we are interested in knowing more about the contours of usefulness and the processes and strategies we can adopt to conduct evaluations that are useful and actually used.³ Second, evaluation use is a relatively concrete and thereby "researchable" topic, although it remains complex, multifaceted, and contextual. Even as such, it is possible to study use both inside and outside the boundaries of evaluation practice. Research on evaluation use has given us typologies of use, multiple processes and strategies we might adopt to enhance use, and considerable fodder for critical reflections on the usefulness of our own evaluation practice.

[Shulha and Cousins \(1997\)](#) offered a review of the extensive evaluation use literature published in the previous decade, partly in honour of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the American Evaluation Association. As the article offers a thoughtful, well-structured review of the explosion of research and literature on evaluation use during the time period between 1986 and 1997, it is well worth rereading every now and then. Among the authors' important observations was the strong emergence of "process use" in the prior decade and its important implications for attending well to the political and interpersonal dimensions of evaluation design and implementation.

Donnelly and Searle's article on "Optimizing use" in this *CJPE* volume is presented as a follow-on to the evaluation use review conducted by [Shulha and Cousins \(1997\)](#), discussed just above. This current article ambitiously (a) updates our understandings of evaluation use by reviewing the past 20 years of this literature, (b) brings into the conversation the "knowledge fields of translation and mobilization" and discusses how they both support and expand our understandings of evaluation use, and (c) imagines an interplay or conversation between these two large bodies of work and its possible constructive implications for evaluation.

Two meta-highlights from this scholarly paper offer echoes to Lyn's and Brad's work or, more accurately, they build on the strong foundation constructed by Lyn and Brad to incorporate additional decades of practice-oriented research

on just how we evaluators can matter in the world. First, the article by Donnelly and Searle demonstrates strong openness to interdisciplinarity, to what we can learn from other fields of theory, research, and practice. This is a longstanding strength of our field of evaluation, for which Lyn has been one of our leading ambassadors. Second, the article also takes a page from Lyn's particular brand of scholarship and thus honours her contributions to our field. The content of Donnelly and Searle's article is

- grounded in what we have done and what we know now, yet also
- forward thinking and boundary-crossing so as to draw good ideas from other fields,
- practical, doable, likely to be at least partially successful, and
- committed to our field, wanting it and us to be the best we can be.

The Contributions of Evaluation Standards to Evaluation as a Profession and a Practice

Most practitioners and theorists in evaluation, as in many other professional fields, recognize the central importance of standards for our work as professional works. Standards for evaluation offer a shared understanding of what constitutes legitimate and credible evaluation work. Few of us, however, venture into the challenging domain of actually setting standards, as this arena is rife with lack of appreciation for the foundational importance of standards and with insufficient authority to actually enforce standards, once established. One of these few is the intrepid and fearless Lyn Shulha! Lyn has contributed significantly to the development, refinement, and promotion of standards of good, defensible evaluation practice, with recent leadership responsibility for the revisions to the standards of utility (Yarbrough, Shulha, & Caruthers, 2004; Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). Lyn has also extended this challenging work of standard setting to her own interests and expertise in collaborative evaluation (see, for example, Cousins & Shulha, 2008; Cousins et al., 2013; Shulha et al., 2016).

Yarbrough et al. (2004) offer a historical account of the development of the evaluation standards, editions one and two. Yarbrough et al. (2011) present the third edition of the evaluation standards, representing seven years of work, involving significant reviews of relevant literature, and the input of hundreds of our peers, our elders, and our evaluation users. Authored by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, this third edition importantly adds to prior editions:

- extensive rationales for and connections among the individual standards;
- integrated illustrations of individual standards in concert with other related standards;
- illustrations of the roles played by contexts and cultures in all dimensions of evaluation quality;
- a new chapter, "Evaluation Accountability," that includes three standards highlighting the importance of summative and formative metaevaluation;

- comprehensive and thoroughly updated documentation lists for each dimension of quality;
- an updated glossary; and
- appendices containing the previous standard statements (from 1981 and 1994) for scholars who want to conduct comparative research (<http://www.jcsee.org/program-evaluation-standards>).

In the article by Don Yarbrough in this *CJPE* volume, who was the lead author of the third edition of *The Program Evaluation Standards*, he observed that these standards “are different [in that] they do not specify how evaluation processes will be implemented exactly for each specific context. . . . Rather, they require reflection and situated application.” Yarbrough further highly praised Lyn’s expertise, persistence, and indefatigable enthusiasm in leading the revisions of the utility standards. As with all of Lyn’s professional endeavors, she engaged in this critical work on our evaluation standards with substantive depth and personal grace.

Lyn the professional evaluator and evaluation scholar indeed has a rich palette of positive affect for all of her professional work and, concomitantly, for the relationships engaged in and through that work. She is energized by a deep commitment to the importance of our field, amidst what is too often a cacophony of meaningless noise, short-term lenses, and self-interested advocacy. Lyn also has a deep commitment to the potential for evaluation to make a difference on this troubled planet, to help redirect resources toward sustainability, to remind our elected officials that all people matter, to provide a voice for those often overlooked or forgotten. In addition, Lyn—both in aspiration and in action—strives to recentre our collective work around the quality of relationships we establish and nurture in our work, for it is in those relationships that everything else happens and counts.

NOTES

- 1 It should be noted that, as a commentary, this manuscript has not been peer reviewed but rather broadens the traditional scholarship by offering a humanizing and heartfelt examination of evaluation use and influence.
- 2 For each respondent-selected evaluation, these two questions were posed: “(a) What were the top 3 reasons why this collaborative approach to evaluation was highly successful/unsuccessful? (b) Provide more details about the project (e.g., purpose, context, other reasons).”
- 3 Once during an evaluation I was leading, the key stakeholder and primary client, who was the director of the program being evaluated, suddenly “disappeared” in that she stopped communicating in any form with the evaluation team. The emotional experience of losing our primary reason for pursuing the evaluation—yet needing to do so because (a) it was a publicly funded program and (b) the graduate student team members were being funded by the project—was unforgettably wrenching.

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