

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus de livres

Colin Robson. (2017). *Small-Scale Evaluation: Principles and Practice*. 2nd ed. London, UK: SAGE. 168 pages. (ISBN: 978-0-7619-5510-8)

**Reviewed by Christine Sheppard, University of Waterloo, and
Tin Vo, Wilfrid Laurier University**

Many individuals are often asked to act as an evaluator, whether they have experience in doing so or not. Colin Robson's book, *Small-scale evaluation: Principles and practice*, provides these "acting evaluators" with strategies to conduct high-quality small-scale evaluations, which are often focused on local programs, completed in shorter timelines, and implemented by an individual or a small team. This book is intended to be a standalone resource and to provide readers with an accessible overview of conducting evaluations that have modest scopes, while offering an abundance of practical examples, references, and tools for individuals to design and implement their own small-scale evaluations.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of who might conduct small-scale evaluations and what they need to be successful. The chapter also introduces the reader to the "tasks" contained in Appendix A, which guide readers through the application of concepts discussed in the book. With a small-scale evaluation project in mind, the tasks contain a series of activities and questions that readers can use to develop their project; however, there is limited reference to these tasks throughout the book, so the reader must be mindful to refer to and complete the activities as they progress through the chapters.

For those "acting evaluators" with limited experience in evaluation, chapter 2 explains what evaluation is and why it should be done. Table 2.1, *Likely concerns of interested parties*, provides a particularly useful and simple overview of what evaluation can be used to accomplish and the types of information that stakeholders will want from small-scale projects. The role of stakeholders in small-scale evaluations is discussed further in chapter 3, where Robson provides insight into different models of stakeholder engagement and identifies situations when a participatory approach may be desirable. To help readers avoid common pitfalls in small-scale evaluation, the chapter also discusses when an evaluator may benefit from partnerships with external consultants, including content-area experts and specialty consultants (e.g., a statistician), although there is limited discussion on how to find and hire an external consultant, especially on a restricted budget.

Selecting an appropriate design is key to any small-scale evaluation. Although an in-depth examination of various evaluation designs is beyond the scope of

Corresponding author: Christine Sheppard, christine.sheppard@uwaterloo.ca

this book, chapter 4 provides a high-level overview of needs assessment, process, and outcome evaluations and helps readers identify which evaluation approach may be most relevant to achieving their purpose. Robson offers concrete steps for conducting a needs assessment, along with possible ways to assess needs through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. In similar depth, the chapter discusses traditional methods for outcome evaluations, including experimental designs and their many variations. In doing so, Robson acknowledges how outcome evaluations may be challenging for small-scale evaluators due to resource constraints and contextual factors, and he recommends “keeping it simple.” Specifically, he advocates for adopting a simple outcome design that will measure indicators identified by stakeholders as being reasonably convincing and will triangulate outcome measures with process indicators. The chapter concludes with an unexpected yet valuable discussion of theory-based, economic, and realist evaluations, findings of which are often useful and relevant for users of small-scale evaluations in resource limited contexts.

Chapter 5 is about designing an evaluation. It walks the reader through developing evaluation questions and selecting data-collection methods. For those “acting evaluators” with limited experience, the example surveys and questionnaires, interview guides, and reflective diaries will be particularly useful. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of factors to consider when conducting a shoestring evaluation to ensure ethical practice even with limited resources. Ethical issues of small-scale evaluations are discussed further in chapter 6, including privacy and confidentiality as well as conducting evaluations with vulnerable populations and in online environments. Throughout the chapter, Robson emphasizes the importance of being aware of the ethical and political environment in order to maintain standards of professional practice, including demonstrating credibility and building collaborative relationships with stakeholders.

The remaining chapters of the book offer narrow insights into key considerations for conducting small-scale evaluation, including coping as an inside evaluator and time management (chapter 7), data analysis (chapter 8), and presenting findings to stakeholders and writing reports (chapter 9). Although some practical resources such as a time budget and report template are provided, the content is presented at a cursory level and thus may have limited utility and applicability for acting small-scale evaluators. The reader may be better served by a more in-depth discussion of challenges and possible solutions related to the practicalities of managing a small-scale project, including creating an evaluation plan, handling data, managing stakeholder relationships, and encouraging stakeholders to use evaluation findings.

Finally, chapter 10 concludes the book with a list of relevant references for readers to take their learning to the next level. Robson offers words of encouragement in Appendix B while providing a practical summary of how to conduct a small-scale evaluation for “acting evaluators.”

Overall, the book provides an introductory, high-level overview of evaluation relevant to “acting evaluators” who may have limited experience in this role. For

these individuals, a key strength of the book is the wealth of examples that illustrate the application of evaluation activities across variety of programs and populations, although not all the examples given are reflective of small-scale projects. These examples provide readers with ideas and insight into the operationalization of evaluation concepts, with follow-up references to complement their learning; however, many of these references are available only to those who have access to peer-reviewed journals.

Despite Robson's intention to create a standalone resource for "acting evaluators" conducting small-scale evaluations, the book falls short in many respects. For instance, the lack of content on fundamental evaluation concepts, such as logic models and evaluation matrices, necessitates supplemental readings to extend the understanding of these concepts. Furthermore, readers should be aware that the book does not function as a resource for resolving common real-world constraints frequently faced by small-scale evaluators. Such challenges might include how to create an evaluation plan, how to prioritize evaluation questions for small-scale projects, how to scale methods to adapt to the real-world context, how to manage stakeholder burnout or collaborate with hard-to-reach stakeholders, or how to design innovative small-scale evaluations with the limited resources. A more robust discussion of these challenges and their potential solutions within the context of a resource-limited environment would allow readers to better plan and execute their small-scale project.

In general, this book is a good starting point for "acting evaluators" to gain insight into the steps needed to carry out a small-scale evaluation. Although supplemental readings are required to complement the concepts discussed in the book, Robson does a comprehensive job in directing the reader to those relevant resources. By way of the tasks identified in Appendix A, this book helps readers reflect on and prepare for their own small-scale evaluation. Overall, this book provides valuable insight into applying evaluation principles to a small-scale context.