

Teaching Africa-Rooted Evaluation: Using a “Model Client” Innovation to Help Shift the Locus of Knowledge Production

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Abstract: *Evaluators working on the African continent are increasingly tasked with reflecting critically on how they might integrate African methods, culture, and knowledge systems into both evaluation teaching and practice. This practice note reflects on one small but potentially significant step toward this: revisiting how we deliver our Principles of Programme Evaluation module at the University of Cape Town. Our idea, which we call a “model client” approach, was to bring on board the evaluation client as a co-learner in the classroom environment. Through a series of instructor-facilitated client-student engagements, which unfolded within the classroom space, we (the instructors, students, and client) arrived at a co-created understanding of the program logic and co-determined the evaluation questions and evaluation approach. Key challenges in implementing this approach included managing the client’s sense of vulnerability, student inexperience in evaluation theory and practice, and a conspicuous shortage of African-generated evaluation case studies and texts.*

Keywords: *evaluation teaching, Made in Africa, model client, participatory approaches*

Résumé : *Les évaluatrices et les évaluateurs qui travaillent sur le continent africain doivent, de plus en plus, faire une réflexion critique sur la façon dont les systèmes de connaissance africains peuvent s’appliquer à la pratique et à l’enseignement de l’évaluation. Cette note sur la pratique traite d’une révision de la façon dont nous offrons le module Principes de l’évaluation de programmes à l’Université de Cape Town. Notre idée, que nous appelons une approche de « client modèle », consiste à inviter le client d’évaluation à se joindre à la classe comme apprenant. Par l’intermédiaire d’une série d’interactions client-étudiantes/étudiants prises en charge par les responsables de la formation, qui ont eu lieu dans la salle de classe, nous (les formatrices, les étudiantes et étudiants et le client) sommes arrivés à une compréhension commune de la logique du programme et avons déterminé ensemble les questions et l’approche d’évaluation. Les principaux obstacles à surmonter pour mettre en œuvre cette approche comprennent : la gestion de la vulnérabilité du client ; le fait*

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de pallier au manque d'expérience des étudiantes et étudiants dans le domaine de la théorie de la pratique de l'évaluation; et le fait de composer avec le manque flagrant de textes et d'études de cas en évaluation en provenance de l'Afrique.

Mots clés : enseignement de l'évaluation, fait en Afrique, client modèle, approche participative

THE TEACHING CONTEXT

In 2008, the University of Cape Town's Master of Philosophy (MPhil) specializing in program evaluation was established with a view toward bringing global advances in evaluation theory and practice to one of Africa's foremost universities. The degree was in its eighth year of implementation when a student protest movement began in South Africa. Originally directed against a statue of Cecil John Rhodes, commemorating the nineteenth-century British imperialist, on the UCT grounds, the protest action (#RhodesMustFall) gained national momentum through 2015 and into 2016 and resulted in the complete suspension of all teaching activities at UCT (and elsewhere) for months at a time. Central to these protests was the call for the "de-commodification" of higher education (i.e., #FeesMustFall) as well as the "decolonization" of the university culture (i.e., #RhodesMustFall) (Malabela, 2017; Ndelu, 2017). Forcefully, often angrily, students were rejecting the notion of the African university as a conduit for Western knowledge transfer and demanding that "instead of Africa and her people being seen only as objects of study, they become key drivers of the decolonial knowledge project, as they reclaim agency as co-creators of global knowledge" (Curriculum Change Working Group, 2018, p. 21). In tandem with this movement, a growing call from African evaluation scholars to "make evaluation our own" was also shifting the status quo toward a specifically African cognitive lens in evaluative thinking (Mbava, 2019). This initial call to action had arisen from the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) conference held in 2007, and for an AfrEA forum in 2012 the African evaluation thought leader Bagele Chilisa was asked to develop a position paper on the concept of "Made in Africa evaluation" (Chilisa, 2015). The discourse on Africa-centric approaches was thus pressing equally on both academic scholars and applied practitioners of evaluation.

We authors are a group of evaluation teachers and practitioners who consider ourselves African in the typically diverse and culturally eclectic sense that characterizes the continent. We present a mix of races and nationalities: Three of us were born in South Africa, and Adilah Boodhoo is a Mauritian national. Authors Goodman, Chapman, and Boodhoo have been teaching evaluation for 10 years but had never been asked to teach it in this consciously Africa-centric way. Our fourth author, in contrast, is a black South African who in 2019 was deeply immersed in postdoctoral research on Africa-centric evaluation approaches but had limited experience teaching evaluation. Our students are also typically diverse: Approximately half of our class of 12–15 are international students who travel from all parts of Africa to participate in our degree program. The other half are

native South Africans who themselves tend to reflect the cultural and racial diversity that is the South African population. Most but not all of the students have had some work experience, and many complete the program while working at the same time.

This teaching practice note reflects on one small but potentially significant step we made toward redesigning a core introductory module for the Master's in Program Evaluation: Principles of Program Evaluation. The curriculum change idea was a relatively simple one, but one incubated in the context of the numerous ideological shifts we have described. Our idea was to move the locus of evaluation knowledge creation away from a theoretically grounded introductory course, which drew predominantly on Western texts and theory, toward an approach where both our understanding of the evaluation process and the evaluation capabilities themselves are co-created by our uniquely African clients, students, and instructors. We begin our practice note by describing the approach we implemented in the first academic semester of 2019, and then reflect on how this approach moves toward addressing concerns around decolonized and Africa-centric evaluation practice. We conclude with reflections on what worked and what did not work in our curriculum redesign process, as well as implications for practice.

THE MODEL CLIENT INNOVATION

In the past, students had been taught the core principles of evaluation with the aid of a North American textbook, most notably [Rossi et al.'s *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* \(2004\)](#). Instructors typically drew on their own experiences as well as examples from the published—often Western—evaluation literature to ground these theoretical principles for the students. Students were later encouraged to apply the core principles they had learned to their own “evaluation client” (the program they were evaluating for their dissertation). This was often a struggle. Although the student's academic supervisor usually attended the first and sometimes second client engagement, in later engagements the combination of student inexperience and discordant power dynamics between students and clients often created tensions in the relationship; a good participatory process was lacking, which inevitably resulted in poor contextualization of the evaluation within the programmatic context.

Failing to adequately contextualize an evaluation within a relevant programmatic context is especially problematic for Made in Africa evaluation, which emphasizes partnerships among knowledge systems, evaluation actors, and stakeholders ([Chilisa, 2015](#); [Cloete, 2016](#); [Mouton et al., 2014](#)). Sustained partnership increases the contextual relevance of an evaluation ([Chouinard & Hopson, 2016](#); [Ofir & Kumar, 2013](#); [Pawson & Tilley, 1997](#); [SenGupta et al., 2004](#)) and can be achieved by using participatory evaluation approaches ([Chouinard & Milley, 2018](#); [Cousins & Chouinard, 2012](#); [King et al., 2007](#)) to capture the various “voices” in knowledge generation ([Carden & Alkin, 2012](#); [Mamdani, 2016](#); [Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018](#)).

In response to these considerations, we developed the idea of a “model client” teaching intervention. This approach involved inviting a real-life evaluation client into the classroom. By doing this we sought to provide students the opportunity to “model” participatory client engagement, the collaborative co-development of evaluation questions, and the process of stakeholder-driven program theory generation in a facilitated classroom environment.

The Emerging African Leaders Program (EALP) was our first model client. The EALP is a public leadership training program for young African professionals run by the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance at UCT. It aims to promote sustainable development and inclusive democratic governance in Africa by creating a strong cohort of ethical and courageous African leaders committed to driving change across the continent. EALP participants are drawn from applicants aged 25–35 years working in civil society, government, and business sectors, with selection based on demonstrated commitment to public-service career trajectories. Participants receive six months of coaching, a two-week residential training program, and access to a strong alumni network that aims to encourage collaboration, integration, and innovation (Camerer et al., 2017).

The objectives of the evaluation engagement were, from the client’s perspective, to ensure continuous program improvement and to optimize anticipated program effects. The client was also keen to enter into a classroom environment and to learn about evaluation; this was an important part of the intervention. By building the capacity of participants as co-evaluators, we hoped to move closer toward promoting evaluation as a “way of life for all Africans” (Omosa & Archibald, 2019, p. 36). We selected the EALP for a variety of reasons: their pan-African focus in every sense of the word, their willingness to participate in a generative collaborative learning experience, their commitment to making both key program personnel and program documentation available to our students, and the alignment between the instructor’s interest in leadership development and the EALP’s macro aim.

TEACHING APPROACH

The revised module was structured so as to alternate theory, reflection, and practice seminars. In an initial theory seminar, for example, the instructor introduced the class to the EALP and facilitated a discussion with students around principles of successful stakeholder engagement and the tailoring of evaluation questions. In the next seminar, EALP representatives were invited into the classroom, and students were required to engage with the client directly under the supervision of the class instructor in a manner that successfully elicited the client’s needs and established a basis for productive collaborative engagement. In a subsequent reflective session, the instructor (present during all seminars) encouraged students to reflect on their engagement. Opportunities arose to discuss, as a class, instances in which the textbook guidelines and protocols become untenable for the EALP context. After these initial engagements, students were assigned to groups and

asked to work on different aspects of the client's program theory, including visually mapping the program logic and identifying mechanisms of interest that might be suitable for further exploration in an evaluation context. These groups were given the opportunity to present their initial ideas to the client, and the ideas were refined through collaborative engagements with the client over subsequent seminars, providing further opportunities to arrive at a mutual understanding of the program logic and of emerging evaluation needs and approaches. This general process was repeated over a series of 11 two-hour seminars, working through the development of evaluation questions, the co-production of a program theory, and the dialogue around evaluation approach and design.

REFLECTIONS ON THE TEACHING APPROACH

Inviting a model client into any classroom raises multiple interesting considerations—some practical and instrumental, others substantive and philosophical. Case-based teaching has had a long and successful history in higher education, and the advantages of using cases to develop knowledge to solve practical problems is incontrovertible. In evaluation teaching, pluralistic teaching and learning approaches (e.g., coursework, mentorship, peer exchanges) are similarly recognized as part of the broader process to develop, reinforce, and sustain different evaluation competencies that underlie strong evaluation practice (Dillman, 2013; Naccarella et al., 2007). There is a significant difference, however, between presenting students with written case studies to stimulate debate and serve as the basis for experiments with decision making, and presenting students with an actual program director or program manager to whom they must present and represent their case. Some key reflections are presented below.

Model client vulnerability

The model client volunteered to co-participate in the teaching space to benefit from having many minds focused on their program through an evaluation lens. During the module, what became clear was the level of vulnerability the model client assumes when they take centre stage in this learning moment. They reveal themselves to the students and have a classroom of critical (constructive but critical) eyes exploring every aspect of their program. This vulnerability cannot be underestimated and, unless managed carefully, has potential to undermine the entire process of co-creation. While we discussed professional ethics with students prior to their introduction to the model client and facilitated discussions and reflection on evaluator-client relations, it was only in the actual classroom session that we truly appreciated the client's vulnerability to the errors made by inexperienced evaluators who have no or limited prior exposure to the complexity of real-world programs. Luckily for us, engagements between students and the model client proceeded smoothly. The students were mindful and, for the most part, respectful, and they recognized the value in the opportunity to work with the client.

Data availability and sensitivity

For the learning experience to succeed, students require access to a vast array of data pertaining to the case under study. These critical data needs were discussed and agreed upon upfront during the contracting stage with the model client. In our case, the model client was generous and trusting in their willingness to share data (e.g., previous evaluation reports, participant survey responses, target short-listing criteria), but neither party was prepared for how the data needs expanded as the module progressed. The more the students learned about the program, the more data they needed. Sourcing additional resources was taxing on the model client and raised issues of how much data is enough in a learning and development space versus an actual evaluation. And related to data availability was the question of data security. The program staff took a bold step in entrusting the class with data not traditionally available in the public domain.

As a Made in Africa evaluation

One of the key themes that came out of both the #RhodesMustFall student protest movement and the Made in Africa evaluation movement was the idea of shifting the locus of knowledge production to the African continent. In our view, this principle must apply not only to evaluation practice but also to the teaching of evaluation. As Tarsilla (2014) cautions, the cost of inaction will be the continued “injecting [of] external knowledge into the circles of evaluation networks in Africa and discouraging the production of authentic African knowledge” (p. 13).

While the parallels between our approach and the core Africa-centric evaluation tenets of knowledge co-creation are notable, we are quick to acknowledge that many challenges still remain to ensure that our teaching approach truly embraces the Made in Africa tenets. We also acknowledge that many of the principles we embraced are not unique to so-called Africa-centric evaluators. The approach also resonates, for example, with practical strategies that promote evaluative thinking (e.g., role-plays, evaluation simulation, and scenario analysis) and is a variant/refinement of what typically comes under the remit of in-service learning—a wide array of experiential education endeavours that hinges on reciprocal, real-world, and real-time learning (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Even noting these similarities, however, we feel that our approach holds a key defining attribute of the shifting of the locus of knowledge production out of the Western textbook and into the African classroom. While many might disagree on the precise definition of Africa-centric evaluation, few would dispute that, first and foremost, the evaluation agenda should be led and owned by Africans (see Chilisa, 2015; Ofir, 2018).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In this final section, we elaborate further on our reflections about the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, as well as how it might be taken further in future teaching and evaluation practice iterations. We feel that the learning process

that unfolded in our UCT teaching space was neither linear nor restricted to our students—it was systemic, with the ultimate aim that all parties involved walk out of the classroom “transformed.” The model client was successful in bringing a more Made in Africa approach into our curriculum as it leveraged the collaborative co-creation of knowledge. Our students demonstrated high levels of investment accountability and engagement in the various learning activities. Some of the power dynamics shifted away from instructor to the students, as the latter took on increasing responsibility for their learning. Moreover, once the class engagement phase was concluded, one of our students continued to work with the EALP under the supervision of the module instructor to evaluate aspects of the program for their Master’s dissertation. This continuity has been important in ensuring that early gains made in co-creating the evaluation process were carried through to completion with an actual evaluation project. Despite the additional work and complexity required in course preparation and implementation, the model client is now a standard feature in the course.

While we have learned a fair amount from the initial implementation, greater reflection on the intended outcomes of this approach for the different parties involved will help maximize the educational benefit and limit the risks. There was considerable risk in introducing naive learner evaluators to a model client at the onset of their academic program. These risks can be mitigated, however, with proper reflection and classroom management. The pedagogic and ontological opportunities of this classroom experience far outweigh the risks.

As instructors, being responsible for holding the space meant that we flipped between the anxiety of intervention failure and the excitement about the learning and knowledge co-creation possibilities. As we go forward, sharing the purpose of the journey with the students and the client, and bringing them more fully on board with what we are aiming to achieve given the context of the Made in Africa discourse, will help immeasurably in building a stronger basis for authentic co-creation.

One additional caution: We cannot emphasize enough the need to carefully choose the model client. Bringing a model client into the classroom is high risk, as it is difficult to predict how students will relate and connect to the client. A vested client and a relatable program implemented with sensitivity to its African roots and contexts are keys to the success of this undertaking. Socializing students in evaluator interpersonal “etiquette” prior to the engagements and sensitizing them to the core critiques that sparked the discourse of Made in Africa evaluation are also critical for the unfolding of a constructive and transformative interaction that is devoid of power dynamics. In a recent position paper on operationalizing Made in Africa evaluation, [Frehiwot \(2019\)](#) places the challenging of power relationships at the forefront of the development process. Adeline Sibanda, former chairperson of the African Evaluation Association, problematizes the issue succinctly in an interview in the same issue: “Decisions about what is evaluated, how, and for whom, remain largely the prerogative of the Global North. . . . Evaluation is about power, the powerful make the decisions on the above questions” ([Sibanda, 2019](#),

p. 11). As a result of shifting the locus of knowledge co-production and allowing the client to be a co-producer, rather than merely a subject, in this process, these power dynamics have the potential to be redefined. Instructors holding this teaching and learning space, however, also need to be comfortable with managing this process, which can take a life of its own, and must have the requisite skills to do so.

A final challenge involves the need to consciously and systematically move away from prescribing reading lists and core texts that are exclusively Western in their orientation. While the Western texts we have used in the past are certainly not irrelevant, a deliberate shift toward elevating African thought and intellectual leadership in the teaching of evaluation is an imperative. Drawing on locally produced and locally applicable case studies and literature to contextualize key theoretical concepts might resonate better with students. Shifting the locus of knowledge production and enhancing a critical mass of intellectual capital from an African vantage point should then be a deliberate, planned outcome led by African theorists and scholars. This has the potential to positively affect the field of evaluation, since embedding a uniquely African lens in evaluation inquiry enriches theory and practice with new insights on a multiplicity of other ways of knowing and on the promotion of credible evaluation evidence. Moving forward, we believe such teaching innovation is critical if our evaluation capacity development efforts are to unfold in a manner that ensures the production of authentic African knowledge. This will, however, require even more innovation to ensure that additional practice-based opportunities are embedded into future curriculum reforms.

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