

# Praxis Makes Perfect? Transcending Textbooks to Learning Evaluation Experientially and in Cultural Contexts

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**Abstract:** *The theory-to-practice loop is riddled with gaps, incongruencies, and, at times, trauma when it comes to the professional development and practice of evaluators. Our current system of professional development for evaluators systemically and institutionally reinforces racism, white privilege, and misogyny, thus re-creating harm and the barriers that so many BIPOC and LGBTQ2S evaluators are working hard to overcome. This article provides the reader with an alternative to the field's valuing and learning evaluation within "institutions of higher education" and other "formal" and "scholarly" learning spaces. Rather, it provides for a balanced approach of experiential learning in the field and within cultural contexts as a much-needed professional design component for developing responsive, effective, and transformative evaluators. Praxis and experience should have at least equal value, merit, and worth for developing current and upcoming evaluators. When done correctly, wisdom to evaluative thinking, development, and practice happens, and not simply reinforcing and generating the same evaluative voices, constructs, and behaviours of the privileged evaluation patriarchy.*

**Keywords:** *anti-racist evaluation, BIPOC evaluators, culturally responsive evaluation, equity evaluation, evaluation praxis, evaluator professional development, Indigenous evaluation*

**Résumé :** *Le cheminement de la théorie à la pratique est ponctué de lacunes, d'incongruences et, parfois, de traumatismes lorsqu'il est question du perfectionnement et de la pratique des évaluatrices et évaluateurs. Notre système actuel de perfectionnement de ces personnes renforce systématiquement et institutionnellement le racisme, le privilège blanc et la misogynie, reproduisant donc les préjugés et les obstacles que bien des évaluatrices et évaluateurs PANDC et LGBTQ2S travaillent sans relâche à surmonter. Le présent article offre aux lectrices et aux lecteurs un point de vue alternatif sur la valeur accordée à l'évaluation et sur l'apprentissage qui en est fait dans le domaine, au sein d'« établissements d'enseignement supérieur » et autres lieux de formation « officiels » et « savants ». Plutôt, il est question d'une approche équilibrée à l'apprentissage expérientiel dans le domaine et dans le cadre de contextes culturels, comme composante indispensable de design professionnel*

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*pour la formation de personnes réactives, efficaces et transformatrices. La praxie et l'expérience devraient au moins se voir accorder une valeur et du mérite équivalents pour la formation de professionnelles et professionnels chevronnés et débutants. Avec suffisamment de soins, la réflexion, le développement et la pratique de l'évaluation peuvent évoluer de façon positive, sans simplement renforcer et générer les voix, les concepts et les comportements du patriarcat privilégié de l'évaluation.*

**Mots clés :** *évaluation antiraciste, évaluatrices et évaluateurs PANDC, évaluation culturellement réactive, évaluation équitable, praxie de l'évaluation, perfectionnement des évaluatrices et des évaluateurs, évaluation autochtone*

As evaluators, we must find new pathways to wisdom, not more expressways to information generation, something evaluation continues to be so deeply engaged in. Information is often ordinary and mostly uneventful. Wisdom is life-changing, life-saving, and transformational. When I asked an Indigenous elder how we described evaluation using our language and traditional knowledge, he told me, “It was a matter of life or death. Books can’t argue back” (D. Turney, personal communication, April 17, 2003). For me as a self-proclaimed “blue collar scholar,” learning in context to apply the latest or most popular evaluation theories and/or methods has been an ongoing experiment for over two decades. As a traditional and Indigenous person who expresses my racial and cultural identity as an active evaluation scholar and practitioner, this continual theory-to-practice loop has been challenging when working with evaluators and institutional partners. However, using praxis and experiential knowledge in the natural environment to balance and speak back to the academy where theory and method are learned in an artificial environment (e.g. university setting, professional development classroom, or from a publication) has proven helpful for teaching and learning evaluation. This practice note will speak to both contexts.

First, the field of evaluation privileges scholarly knowledge and academics over experiential knowledge and the field practice of evaluation practitioners conducting direct evaluations within community contexts. One only needs to review journal publications, journal editorial boards, evaluation association boards, and plenaries, keynotes, and presidential-sponsored sessions to see the overrepresentation of certain groups and institutions and the underrepresentation or complete absence of others (Shanker, 2019). At times, you will see more Indigenous content and author representation in non-journal sources (e.g., white papers, grey literature, conference compendiums, and other trade or virtual publications), but these do not hold as much weight in academia or with the gatekeepers of evidenced-based policy making and practice. Oral history and Indigenous theories or practices are often considered cultural folklore and thus are trivialized, racialized, or dismissed as unsophisticated in ways that devalue or exclude Indigenous ways of knowing and living from permissible evidence in Western literature (Shopes, 2007). In the Western context, evidence is valid only if it is published and employs certain theories and methods or calls upon

certain scholars or institutions to generate that evidence. Therefore, evaluation continues to be a well-paved political and pedagogical pathway for the privileged (Parkhurst, 2017).

Second, the identity politics of evaluation is a high-profile and highly contested space. From the who's who of evaluation theorists listed on a single rootless evaluation theory tree (Alkin, 2012), the white, privileged, and fragile remain predominant. These prevalent voices continue to be the loudest and most resistant to critical assessment of their own approach. As a result, the BIPOC and other underrepresented voices raising the related topics of historical and present institutionalized and systemic oppression are the most missing in evaluation literature and the most traumatized by white and privileged scholars and leaders. BIPOC, and Indigenous in particular, should be overrepresented in order to be visible, active, and equitably resourced so that the methodological and other challenges seen in the field of evaluation can begin to be addressed. The field of evaluation can begin to acknowledge and transform the roots of these injustices and inequities by addressing the power that continues to hold these harmful and traumatic patterns in place.

Changing this harmful dynamic needs to happen in three contexts: education, practice, and behaviour of evaluators. The ways in which evaluation is taught and the valuing or devaluing of where it is taught need to be critically and urgently reflected and acted upon. How evaluation is theorized, taught, and transmitted through practice and scholarly activities needs to directly address privilege, decenter it, and destabilize and eradicate the marginalization harm of the non-privileged. The behaviour of evaluators needs to leave behind the bankrupt idea that a Western academic and capitalistic perspective is neutral. It is harmful and does not treat all ways of knowing as equally valid and valuable evidence. Evaluation as a field must get real and deepen its own critical analysis, allowing it to work more respectfully and effectively with BIPOC and underrepresented communities. Stop producing information that serves individuals and their agendas and pivot to supporting the collective wisdom of our field.

Transformative changes can begin with the education of evaluators and among the faculty and instructors teaching evaluation. Learning how to acknowledge and address issues of white privilege, racism, injustice, and oppression should be required as a foundational priority for any faculty member or leader teaching evaluation theory and method. We must start with the origin stories or roots of racism, sexism, classism, and other doctrines of discovery and/or conquest that still are firmly entrenched in the legal underpinnings of policy and the human practices that perpetuate injustice. Knowing origin stories of oppression will reveal to evaluation students how we participate in these systems so that we can begin to deconstruct and dismantle them. To ignore or exclude this from academic instruction about evaluation simply makes the modern-day academic, policymaker, or practitioner commit the same trauma and injustice as their ancestors did. Teaching about systems of oppression and how evaluators and evaluation can build something new and better is a solid step forward.

In terms of evaluation praxis, critical examination of self-awareness and historical understanding and addressing the intended or unintended consequences of being a white and/or privileged evaluator or evaluation organization are essential. White allies must address these domains if transformative and sustainable improvements are ever to happen in the field of evaluation. Observation and listening should come first given the centuries of dominance, conquest, and poor outcomes or impacts on marginalized groups. “Whitesplaining” (centring a white, male, and/or privileged position to provide thought leadership or evidence-based practices without regard to other populations) or “evalsplaining” (talking generally or theoretically about evaluation practice as applicable to all without lived experience in context, a.k.a. generalizability) simply needs to stop.

The field of evaluation itself can also do much to raise practitioners’ awareness of their own perspective and address the ways in which systemic oppression/privilege affects how they work. Privileged evaluators should hold space for and value the intellectual and practical strengths and contributions of BIPOC and underrepresented populations as a necessary part of the broader field of evaluation. Assure the adequate resourcing for BIPOC evaluators to create and lead studies and contribute to evaluation “thought leader” gatherings. White, male, and/or privileged evaluators can engage in self-reflective practices (e.g., book clubs, panels, publications, plenaries, etc.) about their power and position (and how that contributed or contributes to systemic and institutional injustice, or how it has reversed these trends). More VOPE (Voluntary Organization for Professional Evaluation) professional development offerings focused critically on the meaning and impact of being white, male, and/or privileged as an evaluator would be helpful (e.g., webinars, workshops, evaluation institute offerings, courses, etc.). Content development and delivery of anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and decolonized curriculum, texts, and syllabi by those in power and privilege are desperately needed. Be the change and live that change in your academic and teaching practices.

Evaluators must also address academic and professional gatekeepers, imposters (LaVelle et al., 2018), and conquerors of any colour or intersection. Theoretical considerations about merit and weakness of evaluations, especially regarding Indigenous populations, need to be contested given the fictionalized version of society that predominates (Gagnon, 2013), a privileged view that is also reflected in the unjust and harmful actions of individuals, institutions, and systems in the field of evaluation. “Colonization through evaluation” is alive and well; it exists through procurement policies and monetary or other awards, data access (or lack thereof), broken or dysfunctional networks, and roadmaps and governance-based global efforts that still deny Tribal/First Nations governments and Indigenous scholar practitioners a place at the evaluation table (AEA, 2016). We sit at the mercy of the legal, political, institutional, and evaluative courts of our conquerors with little recourse or acknowledgement by evaluation colleagues or other nation-states involved in global evaluation and sustainability initiatives. Ma te Rae (EvalIndigenous Inaugural Global Evaluation Conference, hosted by Ma Te Rae – Aotearoa/

New Zealand VOPE, February 2019) and the Canadian Evaluation Society are leading the way. But when will a VOPE be led by a sovereign Tribal/First Nation government? There are 1,208 sovereign Tribal/First Nations governments in North America to choose from. Yet they are left out by other VOPEs and international nation/states involved in the work of EvalPartners, EvalParliamentarians, and other global initiatives. The methods and strategies of non-Indigenous need to change to the ethical, professional, and practical inclusion of sovereign Native nations.

## LITERATURE CONSIDERATIONS

This practice note focuses on praxis rather than literature for two reasons: one, the academic focus on “knowledge production” discounts or even leaves out the lived experience of both evaluators and participants in the projects they are evaluating; and two, much evaluation literature also is lacking in the perspectives of BIPOC scholars. Constructions of and contributions to knowledge are often about power, access, and praxis when it comes to educating adults (Mattsson et al., 2008). Evaluation is most often produced and represented by the highest valued evaluation theorists, scholars, and practitioners—most of whom are of European, male, and heterosexual identities and of relatively high socio-economic status. This systemic and compounding problem isn’t getting better by apologetic, ignorant, racist, or romanticized methods. The systematic flow of benefits, resources, access, opportunities, compensation, and power into an institutional system that rewards the white and privileged needs to be brought into balance. And those in power and who are teaching the next generation of evaluators bear the greatest responsibility.

Evaluation pedagogy, praxis, and the education of evaluators create and influence our practices and knowledge production within the field of evaluation. None of the professional development offerings for evaluators in the United States offer professional development certificates or credentials, undergraduate degrees, or graduate degrees in culturally responsive evaluation (Lavelle, 2018). Most of these programs are taught by non-minority faculty and staff from Western institutions. No Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) data sets were included in the study and the minority serving (MSI) or historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) could not be identified through data stratification. We need to know more, and the methods of design, developing partnerships, and complexity systems need to be part of the required strategy.

Using critical evaluation development frameworks and critical evaluative thinking as an applied domain of social inquiry could be restorative and effective. However, there needs to be a professional, political, and resource commitment for this critical work. Efforts and collaborative partnerships are showing small, but encouraging, changes within the field. Examples include Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment Conference, Hawaii-Pacific Evaluation Conference, EvalIndigenous and the global Indigenous evaluation conference (Ma te Rae Evaluation Association), and AEA’s Graduate Diversity Education Initiative. VOPEs

like the Canadian Evaluation Society and Ma Te Rae Evaluation Association (Aotearoa/New Zealand), are all examples of global evaluation organizations led or co-led by Indigenous and Tribal/First Nations people or with direct influence on developing current and future evaluators and evaluation thinking, content, policies, and practices. More educational offerings by evaluation organizations and initiatives are putting culturally responsive, equitable, and inclusive evaluation at the forefront of their strategic activities. The methods and means to do this work exist if you have the professional motivation to look for them.

Decolonizing your cognitive and other constructs is an important method to incorporate. A colonial/privileged assumption is that the evaluator's position is neutral or objective. Being white, male, and/or privileged affects who you are and what you bring to evaluation. In a recent *New Directions in Evaluation* (NDE) issue on Evaluative Thinking, [Vo and Archibald \(2018\)](#) present a thought-provoking call on evaluators to consider how we “think when we are evaluating” as a space to reflect on how evaluative thinking is a central construct to the work of evaluators (p.7). Truly, more on this topic needs to be explicitly shared within the evaluation community so that we can unpack our cognitive reasoning to critically and pragmatically share what is going on in our heads. Who we are as individuals, our life experiences (i.e., praxis), and what we are thinking about affects what we value and bring to any aspect of evaluation activities. On the flip side, evaluative thinking can also reveal what we do not know, do not value, and are not aware of, as well as what we do not have lived experience of (i.e., praxis). This kind of self-analysis can make us aware of how we do, or do not, value and utilize experiential knowledge in natural settings, as an example of values we may not typically consider as part of how we do our work or as part of professional and pedagogical development and knowledge production in evaluation.

Cognitive and metacognitive constructs can be a method to learn, unlearn, and relearn together as an evaluation community. Cognitive theory can be used to dismantle the conqueror (Western) model where dominant and colonial ways of thinking, categorization, privilege, and knowledge. These often go unchecked because they are uncritically considered the norm for what is right and just, despite the complete lack of acknowledgment of how power and dominance were ill-gotten in the first place ([Newcomb, 2008](#)). We must know origin stories in order to understand where we are presently and how we got here, so we can use them as an impetus for a fresh consideration of new ways to go forward together in evaluation more effectively, responsively, and responsibly. We can utilize the methods suggested by [Vo et al. \(2018\)](#), who ask us to share the shortcomings and assumptions of the literature (e.g., “an ideal society from a western perspective”) and the silences of the literature (e.g., “is it possible that evaluative thinking may manifest differently in the context of cross-cultural evaluation where norms and value systems do not converge in the same way . . . unfortunately the literature is silent on this issues because nonwestern views are underrepresented in our data set,” p.39). These reflective and critical methods are the first steps on the practical and rigorous journey we all should be on.

## ENGAGED AND EVALUATIVE LEARNING METHODS IN CONTEXTS OF PRACTICE

The power and ethics of knowing methodologically demonstrate epistemic injustice and academic exploitation are always present. Inadequate resources, absence of intentional policies and activities to counterbalance systemic privilege, and marginalization or oppression of BIPOC offer examples to support this assertion. Epistemic injustice is “wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower in the form of testimonial injustice (prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word) and hermeneutical injustice (when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their experiences)” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Academic and/or epistemic exploitation is not just a concept but a daily lived reality for marginalized groups. Frequently, this experience includes the privileged expecting the marginalized to educate them about the nature of their oppression (Dotson, 2014). This needs to immediately be changed.

Recently explained in detail by Robin DiAngelo (2018), “white fragility” arises out of privileged people being unaware of how greatly their daily lived experience differs from the lived experience of BIPOC and oppresses them, and becoming emotionally upset when confronted with this knowledge. One of the effects of this is the privileged not only failing to critically examine their own attitudes and experiences but asking BIPOC to do that work for them. The emotionally draining and uncompensated nature of this expectation is often invisible to the oppressor and is exploitative and traumatic to the oppressed. Additional resources to address the mental, emotional, and practical labour placed on them by the default disbelief or ignorance of the oppressor/privileged is real. The field must counteract these injustices and ensure that we are not recreating or producing new trauma for BIPOC and underrepresented evaluators. Our methods must be inclusive, adequately resourced beyond standard expectations and efforts, and valued through active participation and academic reconciliation. BIPOC and underrepresented scientists should be valued as integral to what the field does, not put in the margins, at the back of the room, or as inconvenient but PC and a silently resented add-on by the oppressors.

An NDE issue on the Pedagogy of Evaluation (Patton, 2017) provides us with personal methodological strategies to self-examine and avoid causing harm in evaluation pedagogy, thinking, and behaviours. We are reminded that there is “no singular or monolithic pedagogy of evaluation” (p. 9). Patton and the authors of this 2017 NDE publication suggest to the field of evaluation a critical social justice approach based on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2002), a seminal work outlining methods of teaching people to look critically at the systemic power dynamics that maintain inequality. Making the direct connection between inequality, social justice, and evaluation is critically needed in our field of work. This explicit stance recognizes that both the evaluator and the evaluation bring some type of methodological valuing to the practice of evaluation. By studying what we teach evaluators and how we teach it, we can critically unpack and examine which

content, knowledge, experiences, ethics, and values are most utilized. Those who teach evaluation pedagogy and publish on how to find and generate evidence not only greatly influence evaluative thinking but have some of the greatest effects on healing and transforming the field of evaluation as a whole.

Teaching evaluators cultural and scientific content knowledge of BIPOC scholars is a critical way to influence evaluative thinking and doing equitably and regeneratively. What is learned must not be misappropriated or stolen. It belongs to the BIPOC scholar and the communities of traditional practice they birth their responsible scholarship from. Traditional knowledge, worldviews, thinking, philosophies, and practical and experiential knowledge are earned in natural settings as part of a kinship where cultural, spiritual, and personal development happens and eventually can be responsibly shared. Methodologically our expressions are through the lived experiences and realities of Indigenous people, communities, and Tribal/First Nations. Timeless knowledge is found within the oral history of Indigenous peoples and communities, all of which have helped us survive postcolonial contact and impacts of contemporary Western societies. All this good methodological and other medicine continues to happen despite the history of cultural, linguistic, land, and human genocide of Indigenous people (Bowman, 2018).

In conclusion, traditional Indigenous evaluators and culturally responsive evaluation offers evidence of how we are having an impact upon the field. Teaching Indigenous evaluative thinking, theory, and responsive methodological practices to our non-Indigenous partners has been an effective approach to the professional development of non-Indigenous evaluators for decades (Bowman et al., 2015). Expanding this practice more broadly and applying these educational strategies has implications not only for saving the planet (United Nations IPBES, 2019) but also for restoring humanity, justice, and equity to evaluator development happening inside and outside the academy.

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