

Why a Special Issue of Practice Notes about How to Teach Evaluation?: Introducing This Special Issue of *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*

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In the field of evaluation there have long been tensions between the ideas of evaluation as a transactional practice and evaluation as an aspirational practice intrinsically related to questions of worth, purpose, and value. While one of the hallmarks of contemporary evaluation remains its practical, problem-solving orientation, evaluation is not simply the technical application of inquiry methods to address “real world” problems (Fitzpatrick et al., 2009; Preskill, 2000; Schwandt, 2008; Shadish et al., 1991). It is also a highly contextualized socio-political process involving a significant, orchestrated interplay between theory and practice, mediated by dialogue and by reflective practice, and its successful practice requires evaluators to engage with constraints, pressures, opportunities, ambiguities, and uncertainties (Chouinard et al., 2017). Evaluation practice is further informed by a constellation of theories and conceptual models from diverse disciplines, by its contexts of practice, and by the evaluator’s moral/political stance and commitment (Schwandt, 2008; House, 2015).

Complicating matters further, some have suggested that teaching and learning are implicitly a part of contemporary evaluation practice. Patton (2017), for example, called learning through an evaluation process a “pedagogy of evaluation,” positing that evaluators and stakeholders alike develop new ideas and new ways of being and acting in the world (Widdershoven, 2001) because of their participation in the evaluation itself. LaVelle et al. (2020) critiqued Patton’s description of a pedagogy of evaluation as incomplete, suggesting that pedagogy is a planned, systematic process that guides an educator’s decisions about when, where, and how to teach. In this case, a pedagogy of evaluation would be understood to describe where and how to teach evaluative principles and processes.

The intentional teaching of evaluation to novice or would-be users of evaluation remains an ongoing challenge. As teachers of evaluation, or evaluator educators, we must help our students develop the technical and artistic aspects of

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evaluation practice and master the theoretical foundations of the field, while at the same time navigating socio-political and economic realities. Teaching evaluation is tricky business in the best of times, and it is incumbent on evaluator educators to help prepare students for the realities of working in this field—a difficult task, given the range of demands placed on educators both inside and outside university settings (LaVelle & Donaldson, *in press*). How, then, can evaluator educators best prepare their students for practice, and what tools are available to help these educators improve teaching? Unfortunately, beyond the strategies described by Preskill and Russ-Eft (2016), relatively few peer-reviewed resources exist that address how to teach evaluation to students and stakeholders (Preskill, 2000), and even fewer incorporate critical reflections that can help empower others to replicate, refine, and improve upon the original ideas.

In response to this need, we sought the perfect venue for an audacious project: an entire volume of a peer-reviewed journal focused on techniques for teaching evaluation. *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation (CJPE)* was the perfect choice, with its longstanding Practice Notes section giving evaluators a place to share and reflect on what works, what challenges they experienced, and what they would do differently next time. The *CJPE* Practice Notes format allows contributors to teach while reflecting at the same time.

For this special issue of Practice Notes, we reached out to educators across the world, challenging them to think critically about their own teaching of evaluation. We asked the contributors to describe a particular activity or framework that has guided their educative work, and to reflect on its conceptualization, implementation, and outcomes. We further challenged them to write in a way that allows readers to adapt the ideas and tools to their own context. All within 2,000–3,000 words. In response, the authors have shared their wealth of perspectives, values, and reflections on how to create exceptional learning experiences in evaluation. We enjoyed learning with these colleagues, and hope you do, too.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

John La Velle is an assistant professor in evaluation studies at the University of Minnesota. His research examines how universities prepare evaluators for applied work, and he has written on the intersection of job markets and university programs, techniques for recruiting evaluators, evaluator competencies, the psychology of evaluators, and how evaluators can use social science theory to inform their practice. He was awarded the American Evaluation Association's Marcia Guttentag Award in 2019.

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