Book Review

Interactive Evaluation Practice: Mastering the Interpersonal Dynamics of Program Evaluation

By Jean A. King and Laurie Stevahn
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In the study, practice, and teaching of program evaluation, the ability of an evaluator to interact effectively with others is viewed as a key competency. Indeed, on perusing the American Evaluation Association’s Guiding Principles for Evaluators, it is clear that an ability to interact with the various stakeholders who may be involved in an evaluation, in a manner that is honest, fair, culturally competent, respectful, and as inclusive as is feasible, is a competency toward which evaluators should actively strive. However, comprehensive resources for promoting or developing such a competency among both practicing evaluators and students of program evaluation have been heretofore rather sparse. Until now, that is. With the publication of Interactive Evaluation Practice: Mastering the Interpersonal Dynamics of Program Evaluation, Jean A. King of the University of Minnesota and Laurie Stevahn of Seattle University compile their considerable expertise in the teaching and practice of program evaluation into a comprehensive, easy-to-read volume that provides practicing evaluators, as well as teachers and students of program evaluation, with many of the tools necessary for mastering the interpersonal dynamics always at play in the conduct of an evaluation.

That being said, the authors are clear on what their text is not: it is not an introductory text on conducting program evaluation (plenty of those already exist); it is not a text that describes how to engage in a form of participatory evaluation; nor, finally, is it a guidebook for “breaking the ice” with stakeholders (pp. xvii–xviii). Rather, this text is a resource for evaluators to develop the skills required for what King and Stevahn deem interactive evaluation practice (IEP).

King and Stevahn begin the text by firmly asserting that “interactions [with stakeholders] make or break any evaluation process” (p. 17). This may seem a bold claim to some, but it is important to note that their emphasis is on process. The authors are not claiming that the ultimate success of an evaluation hinges on the effectiveness of the interactions between an evaluator and a program’s stakeholders, but rather that the process for conducting an evaluation can be made better or worse through these interactions, and this in itself can affect the overall quality of an evaluation. Their argument is a well-supported and well-documented one. In short, they propose that an evaluator who is more attentive to and
successful at developing effective interactions with stakeholders will facilitate a more effective evaluation process, which, in turn, will enhance the quality of the evaluation itself.

The volume unfolds in three parts. Part 1 accomplishes two tasks. First, it outlines the authors’ rationale for practicing IEP through a discussion of the importance of interpersonal dynamics in the evaluation process, particularly with regard to the three primary roles an evaluator plays—as decision maker, actor, and reflective practitioner. In King and Stevahn’s estimation, mastering the interpersonal factor in program evaluation constitutes the ability to do two things: “(a) interact with people constructively throughout the framing and implementation of evaluation studies and (b) create activities and conditions conducive to positive interactions among evaluation participants” (p. 6). Second, Part 1 provides both a broad overview of the roles and relationships involved in the evaluation process and a theoretical framework to guide action in them. Here the authors urge evaluators and students of evaluation to think broadly about their engagement with stakeholders through the variety of tasks that take place during the course of an evaluation, such that the process becomes a cooperative and mutually beneficial one. The section culminates by outlining the seven core principles of IEP: get personal, structure interaction, examine context, consider politics, expect conflict, respect culture, and take time (p. 61).

Part 2 of the volume provides instruction for the development and mastery of specific skills and strategies. For example, in Chapter 4, the authors discuss the types of conversations that evaluators generally undertake with stakeholders during the course of an evaluation, and outline for the reader the goals for each type of conversation, issues to consider in the conduct of that conversation, potential pitfalls, conversation starters, and sample questions to ask. This information is further developed through the discussion of a case study.

In Chapter 5, King and Stevahn provide what they call “an evaluator’s dozen” of strategies (13 in all) to help facilitate interactions with stakeholders during various points of the evaluation. These strategies are juxtaposed with the authors’ concept of the interpersonal participation quotient (IPQ), a spectrum for understanding who is directing the evaluation (the evaluator on one end of the spectrum and the participants on the other end). In other words, among the 13 strategies provided, evaluators will find straightforward and sometimes fun methods to promote effective interactions between the evaluator and stakeholders in both evaluator-run and participant-directed evaluations, and everything in between.

Finally, in Chapters 6 through 8, evaluators will learn how to put these skills and strategies to use—first by understanding the factors that can affect the viability of an IEP (e.g., context, culture, persons involved, logistics, and communication), and then by putting the strategies to the test in times of conflict and unexpected events.

Interactive Evaluation Practice concludes with Part 3, a collection of three cases by which the reader further develops an understanding of how IEP can unfold in a variety of circumstances. The three cases presented will no doubt prove particularly helpful for teachers of program evaluation.

The strengths of the text lie in its accessibility and its comprehensiveness. The language is straightforward and easy to parse, and the authors’ inclusion of numerous examples and case studies will help readers easily apply the principles being proffered. In addition, the authors take care to discuss their strategies for IEP across a variety of evaluation approaches and organizational, cultural, and political contexts.

If there is a weakness to the text, it is in the theoretical foundations the authors propose for the development of IEP. As they openly acknowledge, the field of program evaluation is rather thin on theoretical underpinnings, and relies more on practical insights in its development. King and Stevahn make a valiant attempt to embed IEP in social interdependence theory and in evaluation use literature, but to a certain
extent, IEP feels like a practice in search of a theory rather than a fully empirically grounded one.

In conclusion, Interactive Evaluation Practice is not intended to serve as an introductory text for the practice of program evaluation, but it will serve very nicely as a companion piece to such a text, for both teachers and students of program evaluation. Indeed, it will help students, especially those who are novices to evaluation, both to understand the importance of the interpersonal dynamics of evaluation practice and to develop tangible skills and strategies for effectively managing them. It will no doubt also prove helpful to practicing evaluators as they develop and refine their own interpersonal skills for more effective evaluation practice.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Billie Sandberg is an assistant professor in the Division of Public Administration at the Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University. Her current research interests include critical social theory and public governance, with a particular focus on philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. Her most recent work has appeared in *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, *Administration & Society*, and *Voluntas*.