Abstract of AES Keynote Address

Critical Challenges That Confront the Evaluation Enterprise*

This keynote address will summarize views shaped by being immersed in the evaluation enterprise for more than three decades, as an evaluation practitioner, administrator, author, trainer/professor, officer in evaluation societies, and editor of a major evaluation journal. Viewing evaluation from these various perspectives has helped to identify a number of crucial issues that currently confront the field of evaluation, and their resolution will largely determine the future of the field, both at the practical and theoretical levels. These include a variety of controversial social and political issues on which there appear to be strongly opposing – even polarized – differences of opinion. This keynote will be an attempt to address – or at least to pose clearly – the several issues that challenge the boundaries of evaluation as we have known it.

This address will include discussion of issues such as these:

- Perils posed to evaluation by paradigm proliferation

- Difficulties in reconciling orthogonal disciplines/philosophies

- Problems associated with "Balkanizing" the field of evaluation

- Ethical and practical issues inherent in evaluators' advocacy for the programs they evaluate (or the values of those operating those programs)

- Debates over the role (or necessity) of "scientific methods" in evaluation

- Problems caused by confusing evaluation with research, assessment, and other "look-alike" inquiry activities.

- Limitations of using evaluation only for accountability purposes

- Dealing with evaluation's "identity crisis"

- The wisdom and necessity of establishing certification or licensure for evaluation practitioners.

And probably several more will occur to me before I get to Perth.

Where feasible, possible ways to resolve these issues will be proposed for further discussion.

*Actually, this "abstract" is both tentative and a bit premature, since I've not yet organized my thoughts carefully or prepared my keynote address. So this is my best **guess** as to what I will cover. Please allow me to repent of any part of this I find less useful than I now anticipate, ok?

Final Title

Using Focus Groups in Program Evaluation [or, if a longer and more descriptive title would be preferable, you might use the following: "The Potentials and Pitfalls in Using Focus Groups to Collect Evaluation Data"]

Learning Objectives for the Workshop

This workshop is intended to provide participants with: (1) a better understanding of focus group interviews (FGIs), (2) understanding of specific techniques that improve the functioning of FGIs and, thus, the data they yield, and (3) practice in applying the workshop content to develop greater confidence and skill in conducting FGIs.

Short Description of the Workshop Content

This workshop will include some general didactic information about what a focus group is and is not, its uses and misuses, characteristics of good focus groups, how to select FGI participants, considerations in selecting FGI moderators (including assistant moderators and the use of volunteer moderators from the target group), pre-planning FGIs, types of questions necessary to FGIs (opening, transition, key, and ending questions), specific questioning techniques: how to control – and benefit from – negative and distracting participants; specific steps, methods, and procedures for use in analyzing FGI data, and time/cost considerations in using FGIs.

Interlaced throughout the workshop will be hands-on practice, simulations, and demonstration of appropriate/inappropriate techniques. Mock FGIs will be conducted where participants are each assigned a role (e.g., "gatekeeper," "supporter," "distractor") and various control/facilitation techniques will be discussed and demonstrated.

Suggested Level of Workshop

This workshop is **not** for sophisticated evaluators with much real focus group experience, but rather for those with no experience or only moderate experience in conducting FGIs.

Equipment Needs

I will need an overhead projector and a good lavalier/lapel microphone, with adequate speaker projection.

Materials

I will provide camera-ready copy of handouts that will need to be copied for each participant (approximately 112 pages) and assume that you will have the materials copied and available at the workshop. I will also send a disk with all of the overhead transparencies (which coincide

with most pages in the handouts), in hopes that you can make overhead transparencies for me there, if possible, to avoid my needing to carry a significant stack of overheads with me on this long international trip. (Also, I have had some prior difficulty in both Canada and Australia in bringing in overheads, since customs officials sometimes seem to interpret them as "marketable materials" and I have had my time getting through customs/immigration extended in ways I would prefer to avoid.) One possible alternative would be to have someone available to assist me in pulling up the overheads directly from the Harvard Graphics computer program and using computer projection of the visuals. We can discuss this more as we come closer to the time.

I believe that is everything you asked for concerning the workshop, but please let me know if there is anything else.