

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS 2004

Penny Hawkins, AES President

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Tena koutou katoa. Good morning everyone. I hope you all had a good day yesterday and enjoyable evening.

Firstly I would like to thank the conference organising committee and SAPMEA for all the hard work – it has certainly paid off. Thanks also to our international speakers who have made the time to come and join our conference this year. And of course thanks to you the audience, without whom there would be no conference.

In thinking about what I would say, in this, my valedictory address as AES President, I looked back over the past three years and found a statement I'd made in my first address in 2002:

“One of the most significant challenges we currently face is to take culture and diversity into consideration in our approaches to evaluation”

Would I say the same today? Well not quite – today, I would make a stronger statement. I now think that if we fail to embrace diversity and pluralism, and to develop culturally competent practices, then evaluation will fail in its endeavour be a positive social change agent. I guess then we can all go back to doing whatever we did before we “fell” into evaluation. But as we all know, in life there is no going back. We have embarked on a journey. And this is a journey without an end. We know we won't reach the destination in our own lifetimes. We heard yesterday from the local Kaurna people that it has taken nearly 200 years for their existence to be formally acknowledged. So from them we can learn patience and perseverance in adversity. Culture change is continuous, and so evaluation has to change and adapt accordingly to remain relevant. Clearly, we have a lot of work ahead of us.

Individual evaluators cannot easily face these challenges alone. We are collectively as well as individually responsible for ensuring our practice is responsive to diversity and culture. The role of professional associations like this one is to support and guide these developments.

What are some of the considerations that might be of relevance to these developments and the AES?

Consider the following three aspects that significantly affect evaluation:

1. People – different disciplines; careers; competencies
2. Practice – different theories; approaches; methods
3. Context – different social and cultural settings

People: One of our strengths is that we come to evaluation from diverse backgrounds (both personal and academic) and bring with us a wide range of knowledge and skills. Misunderstandings and conflict can arise when practitioners are unable to agree on which approach to use for a particular evaluation. We all make choices in how we think about evaluation and the direction in which we want our practice to develop. There are some major tensions at present between, on the one hand, the need to value diversity and adopt a pluralistic approach and the demand for uniformity of approach on the other. There are pitfalls for the profession along the path. For example, the recent polarisation of views in the UK between the Campbell Collaboration and those who have a different orientation. These kinds of “paradigm wars” absorb a lot of energy and time. In Australia and New Zealand we have our own unique challenges – one of these is to acknowledge and support the work of indigenous evaluators in developing culturally compatible evaluation approaches. I would like to see the AES continue to support these developments and be comfortable with the diversity within our professional community.

Practice

Murray Saunders talked yesterday about the responsibility we have for using ethically justifiable processes in our evaluations. There is often an incompatibility between the methodologies acceptable and credible to commissioners and the need for approaches that are ethically responsive to the cultural context. As evaluators I think we have an educative role in explaining the issues to commissioners as well as responsibility for upholding our professional practice standards. Unfortunately there are no simple solutions to these sorts of dilemmas. Professor Saunders also offered us a reminder that:

“It is the responsibility of evaluators to have a vision and a set of values for evaluation.”

I do wonder though if we become like the professional experts he talked about and have an internalised set of values that govern our behaviour (which Saunders claims led to their demise and the subsequent rise of external evaluation) – then will this in turn lead to the demise of evaluators as professional experts? If so, what comes next? It would be good to know this so that we can all adjust our long term career plans accordingly! I think a more serious concern is the demand for evaluation practitioners outstripping supply, leading to people entering the field with no clear conceptual or ethical frameworks for evaluation. The consequence of this is often poor quality evaluations that reduce the

credibility of the evaluation field as a whole. There a role here for professional associations.

Context

What makes sense in one cultural setting often doesn't make sense in another. Any of us who have worked in cross-cultural settings will remember the confusion and discomfort we can feel when our normal frames of reference do not serve us well when trying to operate in unfamiliar cultural setting. As evaluators we have to be careful not to abuse our privileged position and remain vigilant and self-critical as we do our work. It is not surprising that the inappropriate use of traditional Western-based approaches are being vigorously challenged by many indigenous communities when they have failed to provide meaningful information or even worse, caused harm to people. Cultural competence has been described as:

“Both a process and a goal, cultural competence arises through a deliberate and continuous process of self and organisational introspection” (King et al, 2004, New Directions for Evaluation)

How is this relevant to Australia and New Zealand?

In both our countries we have indigenous and other marginalised population groups (youth, older people, unemployed people, disabled people, etc). So all of the issues outlined above are relevant. Australasian evaluation practice has been characterised by its diversity. I view our eclecticism and pragmatism as valuable strengths that we can build on. However, accepting and responding to diversity in our practice is not something that will just happen. It takes a lot of hard work. This work has to be done by ourselves personally, and by or through the organisations in which we work. Our personal values and behaviours and our organisational cultures affect the way we do evaluation. If we aspire to develop approaches that respect difference, embrace diversity and lead to culturally competent evaluations, we have a long journey to travel – I hope, in our diversity, we can all be good travelling companions. Both within our two countries and as we reach out and learn from each other across the Tasman.

What is the AES doing?

The AES has stated a commitment to supporting the development of indigenous evaluation and/or practice related to evaluation with indigenous people. This has been initiated at a strategic level in the organisation with the establishment of a new strategic issues position on the Executive. We still have to examine the structures and process we use as an organisation and how these can be enhanced to support our strategies. Included in this would be an analysis of our cultural norms and the potential for change and development. When I was thinking about this I became curious about what would be found if we analysed our organisation using the values and principle that we have articulated in the Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluation and the Code of Ethics. In the end I only had time to look at the shorter Code of Ethics. This makes direct reference to diversity:

“Members of the Society have different interests in evaluation, work in a diversity of practices in governments, business, educational institutions and community organisations and come from diverse backgrounds.”

Without going into details (as these can be found on the AES website) the Code uses words such as: *differences, inequalities, respect, equity, equality*. In quickly reminding myself what the code covered, I concluded that we already have the basis for improving and developing our practice in relation to diversity and cultural competence.

We have started our journey already. The past three annual conferences have paid significant attention to some of the issues I have mentioned. At the NSW conference I remember we had discussions about Values and in particular the question of “Who’s values count?” The Auckland conference last year had a number of sessions relating to Maori and Pacific evaluation issues. And now this conference in here in Adelaide has continued the flow with the conference theme and content. These are all good opportunities for us to have open discussions and explore the issues in a collegial and supportive way. They are challenging issues and I don’t want to gloss over the fact that there are a range of different and sometimes passionately held views. But then taking up evaluation as an occupation is never advisable for the faint-hearted! We have embarked on a voyage of self-discovery and organisational culture change, and, given our diversity, I hope we can continue to learn from each other within our community as we go. This learning happens during our involvement evaluation processes and in a more intensive way when we get together at conferences like this to reflect on and discuss our practice experiences.

So don’t be afraid of rocking the boat/waka as we navigate the flow together, explore the divergence, try not to fall overboard, hold onto the sides, pull in your oars in when necessary, keep paddling hard and I’m sure we will all go forward as a buoyant and resilient community of evaluators.

I hope you all fully enjoy the next two days of the conference, or given the metaphor I just used, perhaps I should say confluence!

Penny Hawkins
15 October 2004.