

Australasian Evaluation Society 2008 International Conference
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Professional Learning in Evaluation Symposium

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This symposium aims to examine the role of evaluation professional associations in providing and/or facilitating access to professional learning in the theory and practice of evaluation, and in particular, the current and potential roles of the Australasian Evaluation Society in this regard.

As the principal evaluation association in Australasia, the AES has a key leadership role to play in the development and growth of the profession. The interest of the AES in professional development is identified in its Constitution which lists a number of ways by which the Society seeks to achieve its aim of improving the theory, practice and use of evaluation. Two of these relate specifically to professional development, namely

- providing education and training in matters related to evaluation; and
- providing forums for networking and the discussion of ideas including society publications, seminars, workshops and conferences.

The AES has recently established a Professional Learning Committee that is focusing initially on identifying professional learning needs plus ways in which they may be addressed. This symposium provides an opportunity for participants to provide input and reaction as part of this process. The symposium will begin with four brief presentations, focusing on –

- Changing conceptions of professional development/learning
- Approaches to professional learning by evaluation associations
- Professional learning for members/non-members
- Future possibilities for the AES?

The issues raised in these will then be used as a basis for discussion by participants.

Changing conceptions of professional development

The field of professional development has received significant attention in the literature in recent years. Increasingly, the emphasis has switched from the notion of professional development to that of professional learning. This reflects an increasing attention to outcomes as well as a shift from educational deficit models to educational growth models. The emphasis is on growth of the individual in order to create positive a positive impact on practice. The following definition typifies this emphasis.

Professional Learning can be defined as opportunities or experiences that promote enhanced skills, knowledge, attributes, attitudes and behaviours ... to improve service delivery in order to meet present and future organisational objectives and individual career development. (Northern Territory Government Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2007)

The focus on individual learning outcomes signals increasing attention to individual and organisational learning needs (the demand side of the equation) as the key driver of professional learning activities. The provision or facilitation of access to such activities (the supply side of the equation) is still important, but takes on more of a responsive role. The identification of individual and organisational learning needs thus assumes a key place within this notion of professional learning.

What types of needs may be covered? In seeking to answer this, it must be recognised that evaluation is an evolving field of knowledge and skills, drawn upon by a wide range of users operating in a multitude of ever-changing contexts. Two broad domains however may be identified, each with different implications for professional learning.

First, evaluation uses methods of research from established disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics and communications. Many people come to evaluation with backgrounds in these disciplines. From these disciplines, they also bring generic planning, organizational and communication skills that are drawn on in evaluation. There are many opportunities for learning in this domain outside of the world of evaluation.

Secondly, there is an evaluation-specific domain of knowledge and skills. Evaluation knowledge includes, for example, the various definitions of and orientations to evaluation; the purposes, uses and forms of evaluation; the relationship between evaluation, auditing and monitoring; the role of evaluation in public policy and organisational management; different evaluation designs; the concepts of evaluation criteria, valuing, evaluation questions and evaluative arguments; and the utilisation of evaluation. Evaluation skills include, for example, commissioning an evaluation and establishing governance arrangements; planning and managing an evaluation project; relational skills for working with stakeholders; dealing with ethical issues in evaluation; analysing program theory or program logic; preparing evaluation reports and communicating findings.

Relatively few people in Australia and New Zealand appear to come to evaluation with a background in this second domain. Some will undertake postgraduate study in evaluation, but this is often once they have commenced professional work in evaluation. By contrast in the United States and Canada, where there is a range of university courses in evaluation, more people enter the field with formal evaluation qualifications. Opportunities for learning in the second domain in Australia and New Zealand tend to occur mainly within the world of evaluation. This raises particular questions and issues for the AES, the principal evaluation association in the region.

Approaches to professional learning by evaluation associations

In order to identify possible professional learning strategies which the AES might investigate, a scan was done of a number of evaluation societies around the world. The scan showed that nearly all societies conduct regular conferences and one-off events such as workshops and seminars, and some provide a professional journal. However, only the largest societies have established formal professional learning programs. The following is a list of professional learning activities and resources in the three largest evaluation societies, the AES, the American Evaluation Association (AEA), and the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES). It shows that there is a core of elements such as conferences, workshops and journals offered in all three, although these are done in different ways. However, there is also a range of other possible activities, as demonstrated particularly by the Canadian Evaluation Society.

Australasian Evaluation Society

A. Professional Development Events

- Regional Workshops and Seminars– on average 10 workshops per year and more than 20 seminars

B. Journals

- Evaluation Journal of Australasia is produced by the AES twice yearly
- Evaluation and Program Planning is made available to AES members

C. Resources

- Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations
- Code of Ethics
- Policy on the application of the Code of Ethics

American Evaluation Society

A. Professional Development Events

- AEA Summer Institute - 3 day Workshop-based program

B. Journals

- The American Journal of Evaluation (AJE)
- New Directions for Evaluation (NDE)
- Evaluation Review
- Evaluation and the Health Professions

C. List of University Courses – including international

D. List of Conferences and other development events – including private sector events

Canadian Evaluation Society (CES)

A. Professional Development Events

- CES Courses – conducted nationally or by chapters
- Private sector offerings – advertised but not endorsed by CES – participant lists used for CES recruitment
- Conferences of interest to evaluators – listing Policy Statement on Professional Development Opportunities

- B. Professional Journal(s)
Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation (CJPE)
- C. List of Post-secondary courses – courses provided at 31 higher education institutions updated by the institutions and in a wide variety of areas
- D. Professional Practice Guidelines
1. CES Guidelines for Ethical Conduct
 2. Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards
- E. Resources
- Gray Literature database
 - Canadian Bibliography
 - Reports Archive
 - Online evaluation-related newlists
- E. Specialised Training – a series of workshops developed centrally and offered by evaluation professionals in the regions
- Essential Skills Series
 - Logic models
 - Survey research
- F. Canadian Evaluation Society Education Fund - The purpose of the **CESEF** is to provide scholarships, awards, and educational opportunities to Canadians wishing to further their knowledge within the field of “Evaluation”. Not for profit charitable organization funded through donations. Separate from CES. It has 5 programs:
- Educational Assistance Programs
 - One-time Research Awards – Tracer Studies of Student Competitions
 - CESEF Scholarships- annually 2 Masters Level @ \$5000 over 2 years and 2 PhD @\$10000 over 3 years
 - Evaluation Mentoring Awards – (up to \$5000 each for a project up to 6 months long)
 - International (pilot linked to African Evaluation Association)
 - Aboriginal
 - Community Development
 - Student Paper Contest - Costs for attending annual conference, \$500, invitation to present at conference and to submit paper to CJPE funded jointly with CES
- G. Professional designations project
CES project to identify core competencies, ethics and standards and to recognise categories of professional competence, with formal Professional Learning to accompany these

Professional learning for members and non-members

“The Society aims to improve the theory, practice and use of evaluation through:

- establishing and promoting ethics and standards in evaluation practice as a service to the community of evaluators and users of evaluations;
- encouraging advances in the theory and practice of evaluation by publishing such advances and by recognising outstanding contributions;
- providing education and training in matters related to evaluation;
- providing forums for networking and the discussion of ideas including society publications, seminars, workshops and conferences;
- acting as an advocate for evaluation and encouraging understanding about the use and application of evaluation;
- linking members who have similar evaluation interests; and
- other activities consistent with this aim.”

The aims of the AES make it clear that the society is responsible not only for ‘providing education and training in matters relating to evaluation’ but also promoting ethics, advancing theory and practice, networking and promoting understanding of evaluation.

So how do we think then about the role of the Society in meeting the range of professional learning needs of both members and non-members?

Members include a range of people involved both directly and indirectly in evaluation. Some carry out evaluations, others are involved in contracting evaluators and some have an interest in developments in evaluation as one part of their wider work. Members have paid money to belong to the Society – so we want to understand what they expect in return from that subscription in the area of professional learning. There may be some aspects of professional learning which are more relevant to members. Also, access to professional learning is one thing that can enhance the sense of ‘being a member of a professional society’.

When we think of non-members, there are several groups:

- those who are directly involved with evaluations, who, for various reasons, choose not to join the AES (e.g. their employer will only pay for one professional body membership and they have chosen another body as their primary body)
- those who commission evaluations as part of their work, but are not involved in the day to day ‘doing’ of evaluation
- those who use evaluation results to inform their work

Is there something different that we need to provide to non-members by way of professional learning? How much do we engage with them to bring them closer to being members? And how much should we engage to advocate and promote better understanding of evaluation?

Future possibilities for the AES?

Some questions for each group

Activities and methods of delivery

1. What three professional learning **activities** would you like the AES to focus on in the next five years?

Priorities for content and themes

2. A Professional Development Framework paper written for the AES earlier this year provided the following examples of an evaluation-specific domain of knowledge and skills.

‘Evaluation knowledge includes:

- the various definitions of and orientations to evaluation;
- the purposes, uses and forms of evaluation;
- the relationship between evaluation, auditing and monitoring;
- the role of evaluation in public policy and organisational management;
- different evaluation designs;
- the concepts of evaluation criteria, valuing, evaluation questions and evaluative arguments; and
- the utilisation of evaluation.

Evaluation skills can include:

- commissioning an evaluation and establishing governance arrangements;
- planning and managing an evaluation project;
- relational skills for working with stakeholders;
- analysing program theory or program logic;
- preparing evaluation reports and communicating findings.’

In the light of these, what priority **themes** would you suggest for an AES strategic professional learning plan over the next five years? In considering this, you might also wish to take into account current government priorities such as evidence-based decision making and the promotion of longer term learning outcomes.

Role of AES and professional learning

3. How can you best describe the core **role** that the AES should be taking with regard to professional learning in evaluation?