

Rodriguez-Campos, L. (2005). *Collaborative evaluations: A step-by-step model for the evaluator*. Tamarac, FL: Lumina Press.

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When I was initially approached by Michael Scriven to review *Collaborative Evaluations* I was entirely enthusiastic about the invitation. It was only after having received the book that I took note of subtitle ‘*A step-by-step model for the evaluator.*’ Hmm, I thought. Now this looks like an interesting twist. To be completely honest, my enthusiasm turned to skepticism, even before I had cracked the cover. Let me explain.

My own work over the years has focused to a great extent on collaborative evaluation, a label that I choose to use as an umbrella term for a variety of modes of inquiry that would include stakeholder-based evaluation, practical and transformative participatory evaluation and empowerment evaluation. My dealings with collaborative, specifically participatory, evaluation have been at all three generally acknowledged levels of abstraction: theory, research and practice. I have

been directly involved in implementing many such evaluations in JK-12 education, higher education, educational leadership, community mental health and public health contexts. Such projects have been both domestic (Canada) as well as in such foreign settings as Russia and India. I continue to embrace opportunities to be involved in collaborative evaluation projects mostly because I really enjoy working with a range of members from a variety of program communities and contexts; I often learn a great deal about organizational contexts and programmatic responses to serious educational, social and human services problems; and above all, such evaluations often (not always) turn out to be highly useful and influential enterprises. I have also dabbled in theory development with respect to participatory evaluation through integrations of extant research and scholarship and the development of conceptual frameworks of evaluation processes and consequences. Mostly, however, I have been involved in conducting research on participatory and collaborative evaluation: the conditions under which it is best suited, process dimensions and considerations, and the direct and indirect effects that it may have. Finally, I regularly teach graduate-level evaluation courses and in doing so invariably devote significant attention to collaborative approaches.

These experiences, over that past two decades or so, have led me to conclude that the field is anything but ready for a step-by-step model. Liliana Rodriguez-Campos' book, I am afraid, did little to persuade me otherwise. First, let me provide a brief synopsis of the book and then I will turn to some more analytic remarks.

I will say that the book is highly structured and well organized, thorough, systematic and comprehensive with regard to collaborative evaluation processes. I have no doubt that Rodriguez-Campos has a wealth of experience with

collaborative approaches and a very good working knowledge of a variety of domains of inquiry that she brings to bear on the topic. The book begins in a five-page introduction with an explication of her model—model for collaborative evaluation (MCE)—a hexagonal arrangement that encompasses the following six components: identify the situation, clarify the expectations, establish a shared commitment, ensure open communication, encourage best practices, and follow specific guidelines. The book then launches into a systematic explication of each of the components in chapters 1 through 6 (190 pages), by examining in detail each of the respective 3-5 elements. It ends with a three-page section titled ‘Final Comments’ and includes two appendices: one a 37 page checklist with explicit detail associated with all model components and elements, the other a comprehensive 16 page glossary of terms, cross-referenced from the foregoing text through the use of bolded font. The volume concludes with an extensive bibliography, a subject index and notes about the author.

The book targets practicing evaluators—novice and experienced—with reference to a specific practical problem as suggested in the foreword provided by former AEA president James Sanders “The problem is the tendency for nonevaluators to disregard the importance of evaluation. Evaluation, when planned or requested by them, is often an afterthought, an exercise not to be taken seriously, an activity kept in the margins of programs and organizations. This book points the way for evaluators to engage those with whom they work in the evaluation process.” (p. iii). Up front, I counted no less than 26 testimonials from persons who appear to be practicing evaluators or program managers mostly from the US (none of whose name I recognized). This commentary was, I would have to say, replete with superlatives on the order of “a must read,” “extremely useful,” “ground breaking,”

“simply fantastic!” and “it’s a winner!” Having read through them first, I must say, I was a bit dubious starting out. Nevertheless, I proceeded to work my way through the volume, chapter by chapter.

Having done so, I would say that Rodriguez-Campos does succeed in bringing to bear on the business of collaborative evaluation many interesting principles and contributions from a variety of streams of inquiry that have had variable exposure in the evaluation literature to date. Specifically, while principles of organization behavior are no strangers to evaluation discourse, the explicit integration of wisdom from project management and systems engineering domains have been less frequent and obvious, at least to me. Rodriguez-Campos integrates principles from these and related fields with evaluation theory, writ large I would say, to offer systematic, step-by-step practical advice for evaluators. Yet often, I found, this advice did not resonate well with my own experience in collaborative evaluation and seemed to me to be somewhat forced-fitted. The author does introduce a variety of tools and devices that could be usefully applied in such contexts. Some examples are Gantt charts, network diagrams, precedent diagrams, arrow diagrams, responsibility assignment matrices, decision trees and management maps. Most of these tools are designed to assist in evaluation planning and implementation and I have no doubt that the author has found them to be practical and useful. As a reader, however, I would say that I would have stood to benefit from more elaborated examples of application because I had great difficulty imagining collaborative contexts where I would use at least some of these devices (e.g., decision trees, precedent diagrams).

Despite these potentially useful contributions, the book generated within me some quite serious concerns. First, the very brief introduction does little to set the stage

for when and under what circumstances a collaborative approach would be appropriate or desirable. I have been a long-time advocate of using participatory evaluation in contexts that are largely formative or program improvement-oriented. While I see a role for such approaches as part of the accountability function of evaluation, I would avoid using collaborative evaluation approaches when hard-nosed, summative evaluation questions are driving the inquiry. Others would disagree with me, but my point here is that Rodriguez-Campos is silent on the issue and indeed about the circumstances in which collaborative forms of evaluation are likely to be the prudent choice. She is equally silent about differential access to power among CMs—‘collaborative members’ as she calls them—and indeed sketchy about how and why they are identified for participation in the first place. If we have learned anything about collaborative approaches, in my view, we have learned that they are not always appropriate, and when they are, great care needs to be taken to identify and recruit participation from the program community. Whose interests are being served? Who is it that identifies and selects participants and why? What are the downside risks and challenges associated with the involvement of members with varying degree of access to power, privilege and influence? The author would have done well to provide commentary or advice on such issues, in my mind.

Rodriguez-Campos portrays the model as being interactive and responsive to unanticipated events and circumstances through continual attention to feedback mechanisms and auto-analysis. Having worked through the volume I can see how there would be considerable overlap among each of the six components (mentioned above) and the elements within. I can also confirm that steps to seek out feedback are pervasive. Yet as a reader, I was left—perhaps somewhat impressionistically—

with a sense that the steps are to be followed in sequence, and that the entire process is driven and/or controlled very much by the evaluator. I suppose the model might work in some circumstances but several assumptions would have to pan out, in my mind. Required would be a willing set of CMs, eager to contribute where possible and sensible, and who have an abundance of time to do so (i.e., relatively unencumbered by ongoing job responsibilities and the daily press of workplace issues). Required also would be an abundance of time and energy and resources for the evaluator to be routinely calling meetings, and writing and feeding back process reports. Such reports are all about project management and over and above reports on evaluation substance, findings, observations, and the like. My guess is that close adherence to the model would yield an inundating if not crippling amount of project process information that would potentially run the risk of over-burdening the evaluation itself.

Another aspect of the model that I find quite troublesome is the implicit privileged position of the evaluator. To be sure, MCE is highly evaluator-directed, despite its allegiance to open communication and feedback all along the way. I find that collaborative approaches work best when evaluation decision making is shared and where the respective roles of evaluators and non-evaluator stakeholders are understood, at some level, as a partnership:

- Evaluators providing expert input and leadership on evaluation methods, logic, ethics and standards of practice, and applications;
- Non-evaluator stakeholders providing expert input and practical wisdom on program logic and theory and the context within which the program operates.

Yet the checklist approach offered by Rodriguez-Campos in many ways encourages evaluators to assume a hierarchical, somewhat controlling and even paternalistic decision making posture. Let's listen,

You need to take the time to study each individual and understand what motivates them so that you can provide the level of guidance they need throughout the collaborative effort (p. 58).

You need to control your own passions before you can hope to control the passions of others (p. 96).

You need to establish reward systems that are appropriate for the CMs and the specific collaborative evaluation efforts being performed (p. 104).

In conclusion, while *Collaborative Evaluations* has some merit, as I have suggested above, my belief is that this sort of book is well ahead of its time. Badly needed at present is a solid, sophisticated and highly developed knowledge base, grounded in abundant multi-strand empirical research. In short, we need an evidence base that is much further developed than is presently the case, before we can start to think about principles of effective practice in collaborative evaluation at the level of a step-by-step model. Collaborative evaluation is all about context and relationship building and therefore contingency planning, flexibility, fluidity and negotiated space. While Rodriguez-Campos succeeds in drawing our attention to important aspects for consideration, on the whole *Collaborative Evaluations* remains in the 'buyer beware category,' at least for me.