
Competencies for Evaluation as a Civic Science

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The identification of competencies for professional evaluation work depends on a clear understanding of the purpose of that professional work. The enterprises that dominate the marketplace for evaluation (e.g., large foundations, large research and consulting firms, international NGOs, national government agencies) widely share the view that the purpose of evaluation is to develop an evidence base that will inform the decisions faced by policymakers, planners, and program managers. Specifically, decisions about policy and program success (effectiveness), improvement, and value for money. Learning from evaluation for making practical improvements and strategic adjustments importantly figures in this idea of what evaluation is for. Ideally, this purpose should be the central focus in robust, institutionalized national evaluation systems as promoted, for example, in the Global Evaluation Initiative (www.globalevaluationinitiative.org) and captured in its slogan “Better evidence, better policies, better lives.”

Undeniably, there are other answers to the question “What is the purpose of evaluation?” given that the field of evaluation is without a doubt a disputatious community of scholars and practitioners, as Donald Campbell once characterized all applied social science (Overman, 1988). For example, some scholar-practitioners propose that the purpose of evaluation is to transform society by achieving greater social justice and gender equity (Mertens, 2009); others argue that evaluation must first and foremost be culturally responsive (Hood et al., 2015). Yet, these are not mainstream views. They are neither the principal course of evaluation activity nor the major current of opinion. Instead, the conventional understanding of the purpose of evaluation rests on the belief that social, economic, educational, and environmental problems are open to technical problem-solving and scientific expertise. As political scientist Frank Fischer (2007) explains, complex economic and social problems are treated “as issues in need of improvement management and better program design; their solutions are to be found in better collection of data and the application of technical decision approaches” (p. 224). Evaluation aims to deliver verified answers to the broad question, “How did x do with respect to addressing problem y ?” Evaluators believe that these assessments are instrumentally useful to decision makers. Evaluators in the mainstream, conventional view pay little or no attention to questions such as “Where are we going?” “What should be done?” and “Is this desirable?”

This mainstream understanding of why evaluation is undertaken reflects the fact that the field of evaluation is located primarily in an intellectual community defined by the central ideas, aims, and methodologies of the applied social sciences. These are the pragmatic disciplines that aspire to be of use to policymakers, practitioners, and communities and operate in the contested and often chaotic political context of social problem definition and social problem solving. While acknowledging that social, political, and moral values are part of the context in which they work, scholars and practitioners in these disciplines are primarily concerned with a world of facts, with empirical questions that require evidence for answers, with accurate description and valid explanation, and with rendering defensible judgments of the instrumental value of attempts at social problem solving. This dynamic and vigorous community is constantly examining potentially useful analytic concepts (e.g., resilience, sustainability, complexity), new fields of study (e.g., behavioral economics), and new techniques and research tools (e.g., agent-based modeling, big data analytics).

It is in view of this purpose of evaluation and its intellectual home, so to speak, that national and international associations and societies of evaluation have developed lists of competencies required for evaluators. There is considerable convergence among the competencies identified across professional associations (Schwandt, 2015a). Commonly listed competencies include a wide range of knowledge and skills related to professional conduct (i.e., ethics), professional responsibility (e.g., skills and dispositions of critical thinking, logical reasoning, and the construction of sound arguments), planning and management, and technical aspects of inquiry (e.g., methodological skills for gathering information and assessing evidence), as well as diagnostic skills for understanding the architecture and context of complex policies and programs.

In this paper, I relocate evaluation in a different intellectual community and in so doing offer another perspective on the purpose of evaluation. I outline a view of evaluation as a type of civic study wherein the practice itself and the knowledge it generates are resources for civic engagement, democratic action, and political change. This is necessarily an abbreviated presentation of a manifold set of ideas both about civic science and about relocating evaluation as a civic science; readers can find more detail in Schwandt and Gates (2016, 2021).

The intellectual community that serves as a source of ideas for this purpose of evaluation

includes an array of work in different fields of study, such as civic studies, including the work of Harry Boyte, Peter Levine, Elinor Ostrom, and others (e.g., Boyte, 2011a, 2011b; Boyte et al., 2014; Levine, 2011, 2017); political science, notably Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) explanation of the relationship between phronesis and applied social science; public administration and management studies examining coproduction and citizen engagement (e.g., Brandsen & Honigh, 2015; Cooper et al., 2006; Elke & Bovaird, 2016; Michaels & De Graaf, 2017); and discussions of systemic evaluation and community operational research (e.g., Boyd et al., 2007; Schmidt-Abbey et al., 2020). Having sketched this view of evaluation as a professional practice, I offer some comments on the competencies needed for such a practice.

Characteristics of Civic Studies

To generate a picture of what civic studies is all about, I present several defining characteristics of the field. First, the focus of civic studies is the idea of public work, and that notion reflects an epistemology of *civic agency*. According to Harry Boyte—Head of the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg University and founder of Public Achievement, a theory-based practice of citizen organizing to do public work for the common good—agency is the capacity to navigate, negotiate, and transform the world around us, and it has a collective and not simply an individual dimension: “the capacity not only to direct one’s life and shape one’s environment but also to collaborate with others across differences to address common challenges and to make a common world” (2008, p. 3). Citizens are treated as cocreators of the world.

Second, civic study unfolds at a scale of human affairs that operates between large institutions and purely private decisions (Levine, 2011), a space that theorists of deliberative democracy Gutmann and Thompson (1996) called *middle democracy*: “virtually any setting in which citizens come together to reach collective decisions about public issues” (p. 12). Working with schools or mental health agencies at a village or community level is an example of operating in middle democracy.

Third, the primary question addressed in civic study is “What should we do?” Attempts to answer the question assume one understands that it is a “we” question. Peter Levine, professor of citizenship and public affairs at Tufts University, explains, “We cannot accomplish much alone, and we must reason together to improve our opinions and to check biases and self-interest. We become

good citizens, not merely ethical individuals, when we ask this plural question” (2017, p. 195). Of course, there are a host of issues in the epistemology and politics of participation. A pluralist knowledge politics—one in which encouraging and accepting disagreement and difference is a matter not only of inclusion of multiple interests but of facilitating processes of deliberation to account for all perspectives—requires careful attention to matters of power, to the practical aspects of deliberative processes, to the role played by emotions in public discourse, and to deliberative versus argumentative modes of communication (Schwandt & Gates, 2021). All of which require more extensive treatment than can be sketched here.

Fourth, to answer the “we” question citizens must simultaneously engage in explicit and deliberative reasoning about the trifold relationship of *facts, values, and strategies*. Levine (2011) explains:

We citizens need to know facts because we should not try to do something that is impossible, or redundant, or that has harmful but intended consequences.... We also need values because otherwise we cannot distinguish between good and bad collective action.... Finally, civic studies should offer strategies. It is insufficient to wish for better outcomes and determine that those outcomes are possible. We need a path to the desirable results. (pp. 5–6)

Elaboration and inspection of values lies at the heart of this trifold effort for two reasons: (1) Citizens can never gather all the facts—so they must “search for the facts they feel matter, the facts they judge to be significant and valuable,” and (2) citizens are, in daily experience, “practical ethicists”; their jobs, roles, and responsibilities demand that they continually make judgments of good and bad, more or less valued, more significant and less so (Forester, 1999, p. 31).

Fifth, as suggested above, civic study emphasizes the importance of *dialogue and deliberation*. These are ongoing processes of inquiry aimed at mutual understanding, not acts of adversarial communication where the aim is to persuade interlocutors that one’s own position is correct and theirs is false or flawed (Barthold, 2017; Makau & Marty, 2013). Philosopher Lauren Barthold (2017) explains why dialogue is so critical to the important task of inspecting values, interests, and perspectives:

Dialogue ... is not a replacement for other forms of political discourse, like deliberative democracy, but it can be a precursor to discourse that privileges objectivity, persuasion, and consensus. In particularly contentious and polarized situations calm, cool and objective discourse proves untenable. Dialogue is a way to interact that takes the focus off having to agree about facts and/or policy and shifts the focus to understanding the other person's experiences as well as one's own assumptions. It operates on the existential rather than epistemic level. (p. 293)

Yet, there is danger in overemphasizing talk and dialogue at the expense of agency and cocreation, as emphasized by John Forester, whose work focuses on participatory planning and development. He argues that too often we reduce the idea of participation in dialogue and deliberation to speaking and being heard, and we reduce learning to knowing the facts of the matter. Drawing on case studies of planning, he emphasizes moving beyond talk and dialogue to transformative learning that happens as participants in deliberative conversations about value—about the interpretation and aptness of goals and means—not only change their arguments but begin to change themselves, reconstituting their social and political relationships with one another. He reveals how in sharing their perspectives and stories and their lists of strengths and weaknesses, threats, and opportunities, new concerns and relationships arise: “With the concerns come particulars and facts that matter, details suggesting issues to be explored. With the relationships come evolving possibilities of understanding, of mutual agreement and contingent promising, of collaborative opportunities, of going on together in unforeseen ways” (Forester, 1999, p. 151).

Sixth, the relationship between civic agency and professional expertise is a complicated matter that requires careful consideration. Public work, the idea of citizens as cocreators of the world and not simply deliberators and decision makers about the world, faces a formidable obstacle in the cult of the expert—the authority of scientific and disciplinary knowledge:

This cult undercuts forms of knowledge that are not academic [e.g.,] wisdom passed down by cultural elders, spiritual insight, local and craft knowledge, the common sense of a community.... [The cult of expertise] undermines the confidence, standing, and authority of everyday citizens without degrees

and formally credentialed expertise. (Boyte, 2009, p. 2)

Civic agency is the capacity of citizens to act on their own behalf without being led by or deferring to experts.

The distinctive concern of civic sciences is to develop models of the professional's role and expertise as alternatives to commercial- or technocratic-oriented professionalism. As Boyte and Fretz (2010) explain, the civic engagement movement aims to create professionals who will “renew a robust sense of the public purposes of their work and will develop and sustain a far more public culture for collaborative, visible, open work” (p. 69). What civic-minded professionalism looks like has been explored in multiple ways (e.g., Dzur, 2008, 2018; Fischer, 2009; Sullivan, 2005). One viable model is democratic professionalism as explicated by Albert Dzur, professor of political science and philosophy. Dzur (2018) defines democratic professionals as “reform-minded innovators working in education, journalism, criminal justice, healthcare, city government, and other fields” who use their

training, capabilities and authority to help people in their fields of action solve problems together, and even more important, to recognize the kinds of problems they need to solve. They share previously professionalized tasks and encourage lay participation in ways that enhance and enable collective action and deliberation about major social issues inside and outside professional domains. (p. 1)

Dzur (2008) identifies the following defining characteristics of democratic professionals:

- Main focus: Commitment to knowledge and to codirection of professional services
- Source of duty: Professional training as well as expertise and public collaboration
- View of lay people: Citizens with a stake in professional decisions
- Ideal role in society: Share authority and knowledge through task sharing
- Political role: Enabling intermediary in the realm of middle democracy. (p. 130)

Evaluation as a Civic Science

It is not news that the field of evaluation is fairly obsessed with developing and naming evaluation models and approaches. Evaluation as a civic science is not yet another model! Rather, as a

science concerned simultaneously with questions of fact, value, and strategy via the vehicle of citizen agency and cocreation, professional evaluation would embrace the characteristics listed below (in no intended order of importance).

- Contrary to focusing (by default) on evaluation as a discipline or type of applied social science, we begin with considering the evaluative character of everyday experience. As such we realize we are evaluative beings, so to speak, always monitoring and evaluating how we and others and the things we care about are doing and how we should act (individually and together) to work for the best (Sayer, 2011, pp. 1, 23).
- Those engaged in this kind of monitoring and evaluating have specific concerns (i.e., stakes) as well as problems, investments, and issues (stake holdings) that require continual inspection, negotiation, and development (Reynolds, 2010). We can best frame these activities as a matter of making boundary judgments about what facts and values are considered relevant to the situation under consideration and what facts and values are not deemed relevant (Schwandt, 2015b; Schwandt & Gates, 2016). Setting these boundaries is primarily an ethical matter, not a methodological matter.
- Evaluation professionals must do more than simply recognize the existence of human agency and creative capacity; they must promote it (Soltan, 2011). This means that evaluation becomes much more like participatory action research or participatory community development research, employing a variety of methodologies suitable to those endeavors (see, e.g., Chambers, 2017). While stakeholder-oriented evaluation approaches (e.g., democratic evaluation, participatory evaluation) provide a start at relocating evaluation as a civic science, they will come up short to the extent that (a) they accord a primary role to professional evaluator expertise, (b) they focus on the evaluator as activist or change agent rather than as social critic—failing to see that evaluation expertise lies more in being critically reflective, asking questions, and facilitating deliberation than in providing answers, (c) they focus on participation or inclusion in dialogue and deliberation at the expense of cocreation and transformative action. In addition, stakeholder-based approaches offer participatory principles and methodologies for

settling on agreed-upon objectives and criteria. These objectives and criteria then become the desired ends against which the value (performance) of an intervention (policy, program, project, etc.) is to be determined. In contrast, as civic scientists, evaluators would recognize the necessity of ongoing learning and action, both of which are always developing; citizens' current actions reveal ends-in-the-making, and changes in their desired ends call for rapid shifts in current actions. The evaluator would act as a facilitator of citizen learning, public engagement, and cocreation (Schwandt & Gates, 2021).

- One way of conceiving of such a role for the evaluator is as a system steward of well-being, as developed by Bobby Milstein and colleagues at the Rippel Foundation, working on transformative change in the health care system (Milstein, Erickson, et al., 2020; Milstein, Stojicic, et al., 2020). It is worth quoting at length how the notion of stewardship is broadly defined:

Stewardship for well-being is an ancient and still-evolving field of practice concerned with any system that affects who thrives, struggles, or suffers. It is a distinctive way of working across boundaries to reframe how people approach routine work, organizational design, and democratic self-governance.... The job of a steward is to cross boundaries. Stewards, as we understand the role, do not attempt to minimize complexity. Their goal is not to isolate problems so that they can be tackled in a tidy way. Rather, stewards take responsibility for forming working relationships with others, always stretching to connect with people outside one's familiar network, profession, organization, race, gender, caste, or political party. (Milstein, Stojicic, et al., 2020, pp. 43, 46)

Competencies for Evaluation as a Civic Science

Nothing said so far requires that evaluators abandon their expertise in methodology for addressing questions of the merit and worth of policies and programs, or for analyzing the sociopolitical context of social problem solving. Rather, it suggests that while such competencies are necessary for dealing with facts, they are

insufficient for addressing matters of value and strategy. Broadly speaking, a civic science perspective on evaluation practice would suggest additional competencies as follows:

- (a) Acute awareness and understanding of the different and divergent personal and professional learning agendas of citizens, what they value, what they regard as knowledge and evidence, and how they exercise power to promote their preferences (Aston et al., 2021).
- (b) Capability to address politics with a little “p”; that is, interactions among citizens with diverse views and interests, “in horizontal relations with each other, not simply vertical relations with the state, who attempt to solve common problems, create public value, and negotiate a common life” (Boyte, 2005, p. 541).
- (c) (Because the evaluation profession is, by definition, concerned with values and valuing!), a thorough understanding of the play of values and ideals in the social-political circumstances where evaluation work unfolds. This involves examining the values at stake in particular social processes, practices, and institutions; understanding how and why they might be contested; and understanding what endangers them and what under what conditions they might thrive (Selznick, 2008).
- (d) Skills for empirical research in adaptive learning, an increasingly important topic in evaluations that are sensitive to the complexity of the situations in which evaluation is unfolding. For example, Barbara Szijarto and J. Bradley Cousins (2019), with extensive experience in examining participatory evaluation, conducted a study of how evaluators use different strategies to make space for the collaborative interrogation of participants’ ideas and choices.
- (e) Knowledge of the concept and practices of deliberative citizen engagement. The term encompasses multiple processes for involving citizens, civic leaders, and government officials in public spaces to engage in constructive, informed dialogue and deliberation about public issues (Nabatchi et al., 2012).
- (f) Core competencies in civic engagement. The Center for Engaged Democracy Core Competencies Committee (2013) conducted an extensive critical literature review of these competencies focused on civic knowledge, civic skills, dispositions, and practical experience targeted toward teaching in higher education, but its findings could be readily adapted to evaluation as a civic science. Some of the civic knowledge and skills identified by the center are listed here:

Table 1. Civic Knowledge and Skills

Required Civic Knowledge	Required Civic Skills
Efficiency, equity, social justice	Critical reasoning about causes and morality
Inclusiveness, collaboration, constituency building	Democratic decision-making
Value of government, civic institutions, businesses, community participation, public work	Social organizing—coordinated interactions—interactive participation
Responsible citizenship including human rights	Cooperation, consensus building
Equality before the law and social and environmental justice	Communication skills: intergroup communication, negotiation

Final Thoughts

This brief paper is a modest plea for developing a stronger link between the science of evaluation and civic capacities—a link that gives a new interpretation to the democratic purpose of evaluation for the public good. As a civic science, evaluation practice no longer functions as an

external, independent, expert appraisal and a tool used by state actors to rationalize and normalize their actions. Rather, it works as resource for civic agency.

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