

Teaching and Training with Metaphors

MICHAEL QUINN PATTON

Novices come to evaluation with the expectation that it is a singular thing typically expressed by the seemingly obvious question: Does the program work? This simple view of the world often comes in the form of a telephone inquiry: “We are required to do an evaluation and we heard that that’s what you do?”

“What kind of evaluation do you want to do?” I ask.

A moment of silence on the other end, then a halting query: “Kind? What do you mean, ‘kind?’ Is there more than one kind? We just need an evaluation, the usual kind, I guess.”

“That’s a reasonable place to start,” I reply, “but let me try to show you the difficulty. Have you gone out to a restaurant to eat recently?”

“Yes.”

“What kind?”

“Chinese. Wait a minute. Are you saying that there are Chinese evaluations, and Greek evaluations, and French ones. I just want an American one.”

“Well, there are cross-cultural variations, to be sure, but I’m also saying there are fast-food type cheap evaluations, seven-course-elegant-and expensive-meal type evaluations, and everything in between. There are some in which you learn to cook yourself and others where an experienced chef cooks for you. The menu of evaluation has gotten quite long and complex.”

And that leads to a discussion of formative and summative and participatory and learning-oriented and internal and external and utilization-focused . . . It leads to complexity. And choices. And decisions.

And teaching. For every interaction of this kind involves teaching and training actual and potential users. Teaching isn’t just a classroom activity, nor is training confined to workshops. *Every interaction with an evaluation client, participant, stakeholder, and user is a teaching opportunity.* One of the primary teaching tools available to us in illuminating the complex and multifaceted choices involved in designing an evaluation is metaphors and analogies, like the metaphor of choosing among types of restaurants and meals to suggest that evaluation, too, involves diverse menu options.

Michael Quinn Patton • Union Institute & University Graduate College, 3228 46th Ave. S, Minneapolis, MN 55406, USA; Tel: (1) 621-729-7881; E-mail: mpatton@tui.edu.

American Journal of Evaluation, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2002, pp. 93–98. All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.
ISSN: 1098-2140 © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Inc. on behalf of American Evaluation Association.

METAPHORS OF COMPLEXITY

A first step toward complexity can involve reframing that seemingly straightforward and commonsensical question—Does the program work?—from its dichotomous simplicity to the more complicated variable form: In what ways does the program “work” for whom, with what consequences (intended or not), and under what conditions? This reframing suggests that a program will likely work for some participants more than others, whatever “works” means, and that understanding what works for whom is a more layered, more nuanced, and more meaningful question than just asking if the program worked. Likewise, figuring out what kind of evaluation will “work” for specific intended users in a specific context is more complex than just doing a generic evaluation, whatever that might be.

Metaphors can support this more complex understanding of evaluation without having the options become overwhelming. In Minnesota, e.g., the “Land of 10,000 Lakes,” where fishing rivals the weather and our wrestler-governor as the primary topics of conversation, one can approach virtually all of the issues in evaluation through fishing metaphors. Consider this exchange at a workshop aimed at introducing program staff to the issues involved in evaluation. The associate director, let’s call him Jack, and I had an exchange that went something like this:

MQP: What’s the purpose of fishing, the desired outcome?

Jack: To catch fish.

MQP: What if you don’t get any fish, was the day a loss?

Jack: No, because you got to spend time outdoors, maybe with family, like when I took my son fishing when he was young.

MQP: So, if you don’t attain your original goal, you decide that other goals were equally or even more important?

Jack: Yeah, I suppose so.

MQP: This is like the notion of what we call “goal displacement” for those of you who want to take home some jargon to prove you were at an evaluation workshop today. Now suppose you do catch some fish, does it matter what kind or how many?

Jack: Absolutely. You want Northern pike or walleyes, unless you’re fishing for bass. They have to be of legal size, then the bigger the better. And, ideally, you’d like to catch the limit.

MQP: So you have some specific targets in mind for success.

Jack: Usually.

MQP: And does it only matter whether you catch fish, or are there elements of *how* you fish that are important?

Jack: Sure, it matters what kind of bait you use, what your equipment is like, how much struggle the fish gives you, how much skill it takes to land it, how good the weather is, who else is with you, things like that.

MQP: So the process matters and there are qualitative dimensions to the process.

Jack: You could say that.

MQP: And I take it that one of the challenges is matching the right kind of bait and equipment to the kind of fish you want to catch.

Jack: That’s pretty much the essence of fishing.

MQP: Have you ever had an argument with someone about whether the fish you caught was due to luck or your skill?

Jack: Just about every time I’ve gone fishing (said laughing).

MQP: We call that the “attribution problem,” but more on that later. Are there times when you go out to practice fishing or improve your technique where you don’t worry so much about catching fish versus other times when expectations are high that you will bring home dinner?

Jack: When I was younger that was the case. Not so much these days. I doubt that I'll get much better or find new places to fish, but in my younger days I did a lot of practicing, especially fly fishing, and part of the thrill was finding a good new location where the fish were biting.

MQP: You mentioned teaching your son to fish. Did you want him to learn anything more than just how to fish?

Jack: Absolutely. I wanted him to learn patience, to love nature, and to have learned lessons about safety.

MQP: So catching fish is not just an outcome, it can also be a means to other outcomes you care about. Maybe we'll do alternative logic models of fishing, but that's later. What about the cost-benefit ratio? People spend hundreds of dollars on equipment, thousands on a boat, to get something that costs \$10-12 a pound at the market.

Jack: You can't look at it like that. There's more to it than just getting the fish.

MQP: So, we're back to the goals and purposes of fishing.

From here the staff engaged in a lively discussion about the parallels between the outcomes and processes of fishing compared to the outcomes and processes of their work with clients in the program, success criteria for each, and various processes for evaluating success. To start that discussion, I would ask people to list the different goals or outcomes for fishing they had heard Jack mention. Then I'd ask them to think about how to measure and assess each one. For example, the number and type of fish caught, the quality of family time together or friendship bonds deepened, the relaxation and stress reduction of being outdoors, and the son's learning of patience. Then we'd discuss what could go wrong or unintended negative consequences: mercury poisoning from consuming too much fish, family conflict instead of the hoped-for harmony, lost or broken equipment increasing rather than reducing stress, and the son getting frustrated rather than learning patience. This would allow us to discuss the need to find out what really happened on a fishing trip in comparison to what one hoped would happen, and from there we could talk about the need for reality-testing generally. Next, we might build a logic model of fishing based on Jack's responses. By then, participants are chomping at the bit (notice the metaphoric shift) to apply these ways of thinking to the program evaluation task at hand.

Other common activities offer the same opportunities for generating insights about evaluation: gardening, golf, jogging, shopping, losing weight, rearing children, buying a home or car, etc. All of these activities have potentially multiple and conflicting criteria for success, both quantitative and qualitative, with different evaluation strategies depending on whether one is trying to improve, meet some summative target, and/or deepen understanding (about the activity, about life, about oneself). The translation to program evaluation options is fairly straightforward and helps those involved in the discussion recognize that they come with some expertise and experience in evaluation, at least at a common sense level.

MAKING METAPHORS RELEVANT AND MEANINGFUL

I find that I use metaphors most often in evaluation to help people make connections between things they know (like fishing) and things less familiar (like evaluation). Here are some criteria for what makes a good metaphor.

- *Understandable.* It's not enough for the evaluator to understand and like the metaphor; the point is that the person with whom we're communicating should understand the

metaphor. Below I'll offer a stock market metaphor for different kinds of evaluation. It only works with people who know the stock market, like members of the investment committee of a philanthropic foundation board.

- *Connects with their real life experience.* Most everyone has made some major purchase, so using comparison shopping as an analogy to comparing programs will connect with more people's real-life experience than will a stock market analogy.
- *Meaningful—makes the desired point.* A metaphor or analogy helps illuminate some point. If the point of the example isn't clear, the metaphor may confuse things. Bob Stake's metaphor explaining the difference between summative and formative evaluation makes the desired point quite clearly: "When the cook tastes the soup, that's formative; when the guests taste the soup, that's summative." (quoted in Patton, 1997, p. 69)
- *Expresses appropriate values for the intended audience.* Comparing designing an evaluation to planning a military campaign could be offensive to some. Racist, sexist, and other inappropriate allusions must be avoided.
- *Situationally and contextually appropriate.* As I suggested earlier, fishing metaphors tend to work well in Minnesota, but would not work as well where fishing is less common.

Matching Types of Evaluations to Types of Programs

In the last couple of years, the widespread interest in and knowledge about the stock market has provided rich opportunities for metaphoric discussions. Let me share an example.

One of the challenges I have found in facilitating evaluation discussions with philanthropic boards of directors is getting beyond their business bottom-line mentality that there should be some single, easily measured, and universal standard for assessing whether philanthropic grants have been successful—something equivalent to profitability in business. To get them to think about the need for varying evaluation criteria and different evaluation strategies depending upon the type of philanthropic grants made, I developed a matching exercise (Table 1). The exercise involves matching eight different financial instruments (e.g., blue-chip stocks, growth stocks, long-term bonds) with eight different kinds of philanthropic grants (e.g., a grant to the city's most prestigious, long-standing, high-quality theater to support students attending special performances, a grant to expand adult computer literacy programs throughout the state, or a capital fund contribution to a private liberal arts college building campaign). Different financial instruments involve different risk-reward calculations and strategies. Each of the eight financial instruments involves different degrees of likely risk and different degrees of likely return (based on historical averages). That is, these different financial instruments have evolved in the marketplace to meet different needs and each has its own evaluation criteria. For example, a blue-chip stock is expected to have roughly market-average returns at a fairly predictable and consistent level while a growth stock is expected to have rapidly accelerating earnings. People putting together endowment or retirement portfolios are typically advised to diversify across different investment instruments because of the different risk-reward ratios expected. Moreover, the nature and type of diversification depends on how close one is to retirement and therefore, how much risk it is appropriate to take in relation to one's time perspective. (A recent financial cartoon showed an elderly man saying to a friend, "The one good thing about getting old is that you don't have to take a long-term perspective in the stock

TABLE 1.
Portfolio Approach

Types of investments

1. Blue-chip stocks—large, stable, well-known, admired companies
2. Growth stocks—companies with rapidly accelerating earnings
3. Value stocks—companies experiencing earnings difficulties
4. Small cap stocks—newer, smaller, innovative companies
5. Venture capital—start-ups, forming new companies, high risk
6. Real estate limited partnerships (REITs)—apartment buildings, office rentals, shopping malls
7. Long-term government bonds (30-year U.S. Treasuries)
8. Shorter-term high-quality corporate bonds (1-year bonds from companies with strong balance sheets)

Types of grants

- a. A grant to a small non-profit agency to provide therapy in a new program for battered women and their children
- b. Capital fund contribution to a private liberal arts college building campaign
- c. Pledge of year-after-year support to the local United Way campaign
- d. Grant to support technical assistance to a struggling Neighborhood Development Organization after recent negative publicity
- e. One-year general operating support to a United Arts Consortium
- f. Grant to the city's most prestigious, long-standing, high-quality theater to support students attending special performances
- g. Grant to expand adult computer literacy programs throughout the state
- h. Grant to an inner-city neighborhood to create a Children and Families Initiative that will make seed grants to local groups in the neighborhood

Matching: Put the appropriate letter (for type of grant) by each number

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
 - 6.
 - 7.
 - 8.
-

market anymore.” Then, of course, there is Keynes’ classic reminder that “In the long run, we’re all dead.” But I digress)

As soon as they do the exercise, I find that philanthropic board members immediately get the point that, just as different financial instruments involve different evaluation criteria and success standards, so too do different kind of philanthropic grants. We’re then able to have a lively discussion about what kind of diversified philanthropic grant portfolio the board wants, with what distribution of risk across what variations in potential value-added to society. To facilitate that discussion I will have reviewed their grants portfolio in advance and selected three or four examples of grants they’ve actually made to illustrate the variation. For example, I’ll find a grant to a large, long-established, well-known agency (a “Blue Chip”) versus a grant to a new, small, community-based initiative (a “small cap” stock equivalent), and we’ll discuss the likely differences in risks and potential outcomes. For example, the Blue Chip agency

would typically have fewer implementation risks because it has experienced management, a professional accounting system, and a history of accountability reporting, while the “small cap” agency might need capacity-building support and more intensive implementation monitoring early in the grant. The small, community-based initiative is likely to be riskier, but if it works, the incremental difference to the community may be great. The Blue Chip evaluation design might rely on the agency’s own internal outcomes evaluation reporting while the small community agency may need assistance finding an evaluator who can help make the evaluation experience learning-oriented, improvement-focused, and capacity-enhancing.

These comparisons help funders come to understand that evaluation has developed diversified approaches to match the great diversity of kinds of interventions that programs undertake, and that the trick is to match the kind of evaluation to the program decisions at stake, just as the trick in fishing is to match the bait to the kind of fish sought and the conditions under which one is fishing.

In teaching and training with metaphors, we draw upon Thoreau’s insight that “all perception of truth is the detection of an analogy.” In helping those we teach and train to perceive analogies and metaphors related to evaluation, we help them understand truths about the rich diversity of evaluation.

REFERENCE

- Patton, M. Q. (1997). *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.