

**Empowerment Evaluation:**  
**Collaboration, Action Research, and a Case Example**

by

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Empowerment evaluation is an innovative approach to evaluation. It has been adopted in higher education, government, inner-city public education, nonprofit corporations, and foundations throughout the United States and abroad. A wide range of program and policy sectors use empowerment evaluation, including substance abuse prevention, HIV prevention, crime prevention, welfare reform, battered women's shelters, agriculture and rural development, adult probation, adolescent pregnancy prevention, tribal partnership for substance abuse, self-determination and individuals with disabilities, doctoral programs, and accelerated schools. Descriptions of programs that use empowerment evaluation appear in *Empowerment Evaluation: Knowledge and Tools for Self-assessment and Accountability* (Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman 1996). *Empowerment Evaluation* (Fetterman, in press) provides additional insight into this new evaluation approach, including information about how to conduct workshops to train program staff members and participants to evaluate and improve program practice (see also Fetterman 1994a, and 1994b.) In addition, this approach has been institutionalized within the American Evaluation Association and is consistent with the spirit of the standards developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Fetterman 1995b; Joint Committee, 1994).

Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. It employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Although it can be applied to individuals, organizations, communities, and societies or cultures, the focus is usually on programs.

Empowerment evaluation is attentive to empowering processes and outcomes. Zimmerman's work on empowerment theory provides the theoretical framework for empowerment evaluation. According to Zimmerman (in press):

A distinction between empowering processes and outcomes is critical in order to clearly define empowerment theory. Empowerment processes are ones in which attempts to gain control, obtain needed resources, and

critically understand one's social environment are fundamental. The process is empowering if it helps people develop skills so they can become independent problem solvers and decision makers. Empowering processes will vary across levels of analysis. For example, empowering processes for individuals might include organizational or community involvement, empowering processes at the organizational level might include shared leadership and decision making, and empowering processes at the community level might include accessible government, media, and other community resources.

Empowered outcomes refer to operationalization of empowerment so we can study the consequences of citizen attempts to gain greater control in their community or the effects of interventions designed to empower participants. Empowered outcomes also differ across levels of analysis. When we are concerned with individuals, outcomes might include situation specific perceived control, skills, and proactive behaviors. When we are studying organizations, outcomes might include organizational networks, effective resource acquisition, and policy leverage. When we are concerned with community level empowerment, outcomes might include evidence of pluralism, the existence of organizational coalitions, and accessible community resources.

Empowerment evaluation has an unambiguous value orientation--it is designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection. This approach to evaluation has roots in community psychology and action anthropology. It has also been influenced by action research and action evaluation. Program participants--including clients--conduct their own evaluations; an outside evaluator often serves as a coach or additional facilitator depending on internal program capabilities.

Zimmerman's (in press) characterization of the community psychologist's role in empowering activities is easily adapted to the empowerment evaluator:

An empowerment approach to intervention design, implementation, and evaluation redefines the professional's role relationship with the target population. The professional's role becomes one of collaborator and facilitator rather than expert and counselor. As collaborators, professionals learn about the participants through their culture, their world view, and their life struggles. The professional works *with* participants instead of advocating *for* them. The professional's skills, interest, or plans are not imposed on the community; rather, professionals become a resource for a community. This role relationship suggests that what professionals do will depend on the particular place and people with whom they are working, rather than on the technologies that are predetermined to be applied in all situations. While interpersonal assessment and evaluation skills will be necessary, how, where, and with whom they are applied can not be

automatically assumed as in the role of a psychotherapist with clients in a clinic.

Empowerment evaluation also requires sensitivity and adaptation to the local setting. It is not dependent upon a predetermined set of technologies. Empowerment evaluation is necessarily a collaborative group activity, not an individual pursuit. An evaluator does not and cannot empower anyone; people empower themselves, often with assistance and coaching. This process is fundamentally democratic in the sense that it invites (if not demands) participation, examining issues of concern to the entire community in an open forum.

As a result, the context changes: the assessment of a program's value and worth is not the endpoint of the evaluation--as it often is in traditional evaluation--but is part of an ongoing process of program improvement. This new context acknowledges a simple but often overlooked truth: that merit and worth are not static values. Populations shift, goals shift, knowledge about program practices and their value change, and external forces are highly unstable. By internalizing and institutionalizing self-evaluation processes and practices, a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation can be developed to accommodate these shifts. Both value assessments and corresponding plans for program improvement--developed by the group with the assistance of a trained evaluator--are subject to a cyclical process of reflection and self-evaluation. Program participants learn to continually assess their progress toward self-determined goals, and to reshape their plans and strategies according to this assessment. In the process, self-determination is fostered, illumination generated, and liberation actualized.

Value assessments are also highly sensitive to the life cycle of the program or organization. Goals and outcomes are geared toward the appropriate developmental level of implementation. Extraordinary improvements are not expected of a project that will not be fully implemented until the following year. Similarly, seemingly small gains or improvements in programs at an embryonic stage are recognized and appreciated in relation to their stage of development. In a fully operational and mature program, moderate improvements or declining outcomes are viewed more critically.

### **Roots, Influences, and Comparisons**

Empowerment evaluation has many sources. The idea first germinated during preparation of another book, *Speaking the Language of Power: Communication, Collaboration, and Advocacy* (Fetterman, 1993c). In developing that collection, I wanted to explore the many ways that evaluators and social scientists could give voice to the people they work with and bring their concerns to policybrokers. I found that, increasingly, socially concerned scholars in myriad fields are making their insights and findings available to decision makers. These scholars and practitioners address a host of significant issues, including conflict resolution, the drop-out problem, environmental health and safety, homelessness, educational reform, AIDS, American Indian concerns, and the education of gifted children. The aim of these scholars and practitioners was to explore successful strategies, share lessons learned, and enhance their ability to communicate with an educated

citizenry and powerful policy-making bodies. Collaboration, participation, and empowerment emerged as common threads throughout the work and helped to crystallize the concept of empowerment evaluation.

Empowerment evaluation has roots in community psychology, action anthropology, and action research. Community psychology focuses on people, organizations, and communities working to establish control over their affairs. The literature about citizen participation and community development is extensive. Rappaport's (1987) "Terms of Empowerment/Exemplars of Prevention: Toward a Theory for Community Psychology" is a classic in this area. Sol Tax's (1958) work in action anthropology focuses on how anthropologists can facilitate the goals and objectives of self-determining groups, such as Native American tribes. Empowerment evaluation also derives from collaborative and participatory evaluation (Choudhary & Tandon, 1988; Oja & Smulyan, 1989; Papineau & Kiely, 1994; Reason, 1988; Shapiro, 1988; Stull & Schensul, 1987; Whitmore, 1990; Whyte, 1990).

Empowerment evaluation has been strongly influenced by and is similar to action research. Stakeholders typically control the study and conduct the work in action research and empowerment evaluation. In addition, practitioners empower themselves in both forms of inquiry and action. Empowerment evaluation and action research are characterized by concrete, timely, targeted, pragmatic orientations toward program improvement. They both require cycles of reflection and action and focus on the simplest data collection methods adequate to the task at hand. However, there are conceptual and stylistic differences between the approaches. For example, empowerment evaluation is explicitly driven by the concept of self-determination. It is also explicitly collaborative in nature. Action research can be either an individual effort documented in a journal or a group effort. Written narratives are used to share findings with colleagues. (See Soffer, 1995). A group in a collaborative fashion conducts empowerment evaluation, with a holistic focus on an entire program or agency. Empowerment evaluation is never conducted by a single individual. Action research is often conducted on top of the normal daily responsibilities of a practitioner. Empowerment evaluation is internalized as part of the planning and management of a program. The institutionalization of evaluation, in this manner, makes it more likely to be sustainable rather than sporadic. In spite of these differences, the overwhelming number of similarities between the approaches has enriched empowerment evaluation.

Another major influence was the national educational school reform movement with colleagues such as Henry Levin, whose Accelerated School Project (ASP) emphasizes the empowerment of parents, teachers, and administrators to improve educational settings. We worked to help design an appropriate evaluation plan for the Accelerated School Project that contributes to the empowerment of teachers, parents, students, and administrators (Fetterman & Haertel, 1990). The ASP team and I also mapped out detailed strategies for districtwide adoption of the project in an effort to help institutionalize the project in the school system (Stanford University and American Institutes for Research, 1992).

Dennis Mithaug's (1991, 1993) extensive work with individuals with disabilities to explore concepts of self-regulation and self-determination provided additional inspiration. We completed a 2-year Department of Education-funded grant on self-determination and individuals with disabilities. We conducted research designed to help both providers for students with disabilities and the students themselves become more empowered. We learned about self-determined behavior and attitudes and environmentally related features of self-determination by listening to self-determined children with disabilities and their providers. Using specific concepts and behaviors extracted from these case studies, we developed a behavioral checklist to assist providers as they work to recognize and foster self-determination.

Self-determination, defined as the ability to chart one's own course in life, forms the theoretical foundation of empowerment evaluation. It consists of numerous interconnected capabilities, such as the ability to identify and express needs, establish goals or expectations and a plan of action to achieve them, identify resources, make rational choices from various alternative courses of action, take appropriate steps to pursue objectives, evaluate short- and long-term results (including reassessing plans and expectations and taking necessary detours), and persist in the pursuit of those goals. A breakdown at any juncture of this network of capabilities--as well as various environmental factors--can reduce a person's likelihood of being self-determined. (See also Bandura, 1982, concerning the self-efficacy mechanism in human agency.)

A pragmatic influence on empowerment evaluation is the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's emphasis on empowerment in community settings. The foundation has taken a clear position concerning empowerment as a funding strategy:

We've long been convinced that problems can best be solved at the local level by people who live with them on a daily basis. In other words, individuals and groups of people must be empowered to become changemakers and solve their own problems, through the organizations and institutions they devise. Through our community-based programming, we are helping to empower various individuals, agencies, institutions, and organizations to work together to identify problems and to find quality, cost-effective solutions. In doing so, we find ourselves working more than ever with grantees with whom we have been less involved--smaller, newer organizations and their programs. (*Transitions*, 1992, p. 6)

Its work in the areas of youth, leadership, community-based health services, higher education, food systems, rural development, and families and neighborhoods exemplifies this spirit of putting "power in the hands of creative and committed individuals--power that will enable them to make important changes in the world" (p. 13). For example, one project--Kellogg's Empowering Farm Women to Reduce Hazards to Family Health and Safety on the Farm--involves a participatory evaluation component. The work of Sanders, Barley, and Jenness (1990) on cluster evaluations for the Kellogg Foundation also highlights the value of giving ownership of the evaluation to project directors and staff members of science education projects.

These influences, activities, and experiences form the background for this new evaluation approach. An eloquent literature on empowerment theory by Zimmerman (in press), Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, and Checkoway (1992), Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988), and Dunst, Trivette, and LaPointe (1992), as discussed earlier, also informs this approach. A brief discussion about the pursuit of truth and a review of empowerment evaluation's many facets and steps will illustrate its wide-ranging application.

### **Pursuit of Truth and Honesty**

Empowerment evaluation is guided by many principles. One of the most important is a commitment to truth and honesty. This is not a naive concept of one absolute truth, but a sincere intent to understand an event in context and from multiple worldviews. The aim is to try and understand what's going on in a situation from the participant's own perspective as accurately and honestly as possible and then proceed to improve it with meaningful goals and strategies and credible documentation. There are many checks and balances in empowerment evaluation, such as having a democratic approach to participation--involving participants at all levels of the organization, relying on external evaluators as critical friends, and so on.

Empowerment evaluation is like a personnel performance self-appraisal. You come to an agreement with your supervisor about your goals, strategies for accomplishing those goals, and credible documentation to determine if you are meeting your goals. The same agreement is made with your clients. If the data are not credible, you lose your credibility immediately. If the data merit it at the end of the year, you can use it to advocate for yourself. Empowerment evaluation applies the same approach to the program and community level. Advocacy, in this context, becomes a natural byproduct of the self-evaluation process--if the data merit it. Advocacy is meaningless in the absence of credible data. In addition, external standards and/or requirements can significantly influence any self-evaluation. To operate without consideration of these external forces is to proceed at your own peril. However, the process must be grounded in an authentic understanding and expression of everyday life at the program or community level. A commitment to the ideals of truth and honesty guides every facet and step of empowerment evaluation.

### **Facets of Empowerment Evaluation**

In this new context, training, facilitation, advocacy, illumination, and liberation are all facets--if not developmental stages--of empowerment evaluation. Rather than additional roles for an evaluator whose primary function is to assess worth (as defined by Stufflebeam, 1994 and Scriven, 1967), these facets are an integral part of the evaluation process. Cronbach's developmental focus is relevant: the emphasis is on program development, improvement, and lifelong learning.

**Training.** In one facet of empowerment evaluation, evaluators teach people to conduct their own evaluations and thus become more self-sufficient. This approach desensitizes and demystifies evaluation and ideally helps organizations internalize evaluation

principles and practices, making evaluation an integral part of program planning. Too often, an external evaluation is an exercise in dependency rather than an empowering experience: In these instances, the process ends when the evaluator departs, leaving participants without the knowledge or experience to continue for themselves. In contrast, an evaluation conducted by program participants is designed to be ongoing and internalized in the system, creating the opportunity for capacity building.

In empowerment evaluation, training is used to map out the terrain, highlighting categories and concerns. It is also used in making preliminary assessments of program components, while illustrating the need to establish goals, strategies to achieve goals, and documentation to indicate or substantiate progress. Training a group to conduct a self-evaluation can be considered equivalent to developing an evaluation or research design (as that is the core of the training), a standard part of any evaluation. This training is ongoing, as new skills are needed to respond to new levels of understanding. Training also becomes part of the self-reflective process of self-assessment (on a program level) in that participants must learn to recognize when more tools are required to continue and enhance the evaluation process. This self-assessment process is pervasive in an empowerment evaluation--built into every part of a program, even to the point of reflecting on how its own meetings are conducted and feeding that input into future practice.

In essence, empowerment evaluation is the "give someone a fish and you feed her for a day; teach her to fish, and she will feed herself for the rest of her life" concept, as applied to evaluation. The primary difference is that in empowerment evaluation the evaluator and the individuals benefiting from the evaluation are typically on an even plane, learning from each other.

**Facilitation.** Empowerment evaluators serve as coaches or facilitators to help others conduct a self-evaluation. In my role as a coach, I provide general guidance and direction to the effort, attending sessions to monitor and facilitate as needed. It is critical to emphasize that the staff are in charge of their effort; otherwise, program participants initially tend to look to the empowerment evaluator as expert, which makes them dependent on an outside agent. In some instances, my task is to clear away obstacles and identify and clarify miscommunication patterns. I also participate in many meetings along with internal empowerment evaluators, providing explanations, suggestions, and advice at various junctures to help ensure that the process had a fair chance.

An empowerment evaluation coach can also provide useful information about how to create facilitation teams (balancing analytical and social skills), work with resistant (but interested) units, develop refresher sessions to energize tired units, and resolve various protocol issues. Simple suggestions along these lines can keep an effort from backfiring or being seriously derailed. A coach may also be asked to help create the evaluation design with minimal additional support.

Whatever her contribution, the empowerment evaluation coach must ensure that the evaluation remains in the hands of program personnel. The coach's task is to provide

useful information, based on her evaluator's training and past experience, to keep the effort on course.

**Advocacy.** A common workplace practice provides a familiar illustration of self-evaluation and its link to advocacy on an individual level. Employees often collaborate with both supervisor and clients to establish goals, strategies for achieving those goals and documenting progress, and realistic time lines. Employees collect data on their own performance and present their case for their performance appraisal. Self-evaluation thus becomes a tool of advocacy. This individual self-evaluation process is easily transferable to the group or program level.

**Illumination.** Illumination is an eye-opening, revealing, and enlightening experience. Typically, a new insight or understanding about roles, structures, and program dynamics is developed in the process of determining worth and striving for program improvement (see Parlett & Hamilton, 1976). Empowerment evaluation is illuminating on a number of levels. For example, an administrator in one empowerment evaluation, with little or no research background, developed a testable, researchable hypothesis in the middle of a discussion about indicators and self-evaluation. It was not only illuminating to the group (and to her), it revealed what they could do as a group when given the opportunity to think about problems and come up with workable options, hypotheses, and tests. This experience of illumination holds the same intellectual intoxication each of us experienced the first time we came up with a researchable question. The process creates a dynamic community of learners as people engage in the art and science of evaluating themselves.

**Liberation.** Illumination often sets the stage for liberation. It can unleash powerful, emancipatory forces for self-determination. Liberation is the act of being freed or freeing oneself from preexisting roles and constraints. It often involves new conceptualizations of oneself and others. Empowerment evaluation can also be liberating. Many of the examples in this discussion demonstrate how helping individuals take charge of their lives--and find useful ways to evaluate themselves--liberates them from traditional expectations and roles. They also demonstrate how empowerment evaluation enables participants to find new opportunities, see existing resources in a new light, and redefine their identities and future roles.

### **Steps of Empowerment Evaluation**

There are several pragmatic steps involved in helping others learn to evaluate their own programs: 1) taking stock or determining where the program stands, including strengths and weaknesses; 2) focusing on establishing goals--determining where you want to go in the future with an explicit emphasis on program improvement; 3) developing strategies and helping participants determine their own strategies to accomplish program goals and objectives; and 4) helping program participants determine the type of evidence required to document progress credibly toward their goals.

**Taking Stock.** One of the first steps in empowerment evaluation is taking stock. Program participants are asked to rate their program on a 1 to 10 scale, with 10 being the highest



level. They are asked to make the rating as accurate as possible. Many participants find it less threatening or overwhelming to begin by listing, describing, and then rating individual activities in their program, before attempting a gestalt or overall unit rating. Specific program activities might include recruitment, admissions, pedagogy, curriculum, graduation, and alumni tracking in a school setting. The potential list of components to rate is endless, and each participant must prioritize the list of items--typically limiting the rating to the top 10 activities. Program participants are also asked to document their ratings (both the ratings of specific program components and the overall program rating). Typically, some participants give their programs an unrealistically high rating. The absence of appropriate documentation, peer ratings, and a reminder about the realities of their environment--such as a high drop-out rate, students bringing guns to school, and racial violence in a high school--help participants recalibrate their rating, however. In some cases, ratings stay higher than peers consider appropriate. The significance of this process, however, is not the actual rating so much as it is the creation of a baseline from which future progress can be measured. In addition, it sensitizes program participants to the necessity of collecting data to support assessments or appraisals.

**Setting Goals.** After rating their program's performance and providing documentation to support that rating, program participants are asked how highly they would like to rate their program in the future. Then they are asked what goals they want to set to warrant that future rating. These goals should be established in conjunction with supervisors and clients to ensure relevance from both perspectives. In addition, goals should be realistic, taking into consideration such factors as initial conditions, motivation, resources, and program dynamics.

It is important that goals be related to the program's activities, talents, resources, and scope of capability. One problem with traditional external evaluation is that programs have been given grandiose goals or long-term goals that participants could only contribute to in some indirect manner. There was no link between their daily activities and ultimate long-term program outcomes in terms of these goals. In empowerment evaluation, program participants are encouraged to select intermediate goals that are directly linked to their daily activities. These activities can then be linked to larger, more diffuse goals, creating a clear chain of outcomes.

Program participants are encouraged to be creative in establishing their goals. A brainstorming approach is often used to generate a new set of goals. Individuals are asked to state what they think the program should be doing. The list generated from this activity is refined, reduced, and made realistic after the brainstorming phase, through a critical review and consensual agreement process.

There are also a bewildering number of goals to strive for at any given time. As a group begins to establish goals based on this initial review of their program, they realize quickly that a consensus is required to determine the most significant issues to focus on. These are chosen according to significance to the operation of the program, such as teaching; timing or urgency, such as recruitment or budget issues; and vision, including community building and learning processes.

Goal setting can be a slow process when program participants have a heavy work schedule. Sensitivity to the pacing of this effort is essential. Additional tasks of any kind and for any purpose may be perceived as simply another burden when everyone is fighting to keep their heads above water.

**Developing Strategies.** Program participants are also responsible for selecting and developing strategies to accomplish program objectives. The same process of brainstorming, critical review, and consensual agreement is used to establish a set of strategies. These strategies are routinely reviewed to determine their effectiveness and appropriateness. Determining appropriate strategies, in consultation with sponsors and clients, is an essential part of the empowering process. Program participants are typically the most knowledgeable about their own jobs, and this approach acknowledges and uses that expertise--and in the process, puts them back in the "driver's seat."

**Documenting Progress.** In Step 4, program participants are asked what type of documentation is required to monitor progress toward their goals. This is a critical step. Each form of documentation is scrutinized for relevance to avoid devoting time to collecting information that will not be useful or relevant. Program participants are asked to explain how a given form of documentation is related to specific program goals. This review process is difficult and time-consuming but prevents wasted time and disillusionment at the end of the process. In addition, documentation must be credible and rigorous if it is to withstand the criticism that this evaluation is self-serving. (See Fetterman, 1994, for a detailed discussion of these steps and case examples.)

### **Dynamic Community of Learners**

Many elements must be in place for empowerment evaluation to be effective and credible. Participants must have the latitude to experiment, taking both risks and responsibility for their actions. An environment conducive to sharing successes and failures is also essential. In addition, an honest, self-critical, trusting, and supportive atmosphere is required. Conditions need not be perfect to initiate this process. However, the accuracy and usefulness of self-ratings improve dramatically in this context. An outside evaluator who is charged with monitoring the process can help keep the effort credible, useful, and on track, providing additional rigor, reality checks, and quality controls throughout the evaluation. Without any of these elements in place, the exercise may be of limited utility and potentially self-serving. With many of these elements in place, the exercise can create a dynamic community of transformative learning.

### **The Institute: A Case Example**

The California Institute of Integral Studies is an independent graduate school located in San Francisco. It has been accredited since 1981 by the Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of Schools and Colleges (WASC). The accreditation process requires periodic self-evaluations. The Institute adopted an empowerment evaluation approach as a tool to institutionalize evaluation as part of the planning and management of operations and to respond to the accreditation self-study requirement. Empowerment evaluation is a

form of self-evaluation that is designed to foster program improvement and self-determination (instead of dependency). It has two parts: the first is focused on examining and assessing the merit of a unit. The second part is designed to establish goals and strategies to improve program practice. This second stage is part of strategic planning and is built on the foundation of program evaluation.

All units in the Institute--including academic, governance, and administrative units -- have conducted self-evaluations. The purpose of these self-evaluations is to improve operations and build a base for planning and decision making. In addition to focusing on improvement, these self-evaluations contribute to institutional accountability.

Workshops were conducted throughout the Institute to provide training in evaluation techniques and procedures. All unit heads attended the training sessions held over three days. They served as facilitators in their own groups. Training and individual technical assistance was also provided throughout the year for governance and other administrative groups, including the Office of the President and the Development Office. (See Appendix A for additional detail.)

The self-evaluation process required thoughtful reflection and inquiry. The units described their purpose and listed approximately ten key unit activities that characterized their unit. Members of the unit democratically determined the top ten activities that merit consideration and evaluation. Then each member of a unit evaluated each activity by rating the activities on a 1 to 10 scale. Individual ratings are combined to produce a group or unit rating for each activity and one for the total unit. Unit members review these ratings. A sample matrix is provided below to illustrate how this process was implemented.

- [View Spreadsheet](#) (best viewed at screen resolutions of 1024x768)

Unit members discuss and dissect the meaning of the activities listed in the matrix and the ratings given to each activity. This exchange provides unit members with an opportunity to establish norms concerning the meaning of terms and ratings in an open and collegial atmosphere. Unit members are also required to provide evidence or documentation for each rating and/or to identify areas in which additional documentation is needed. These self-evaluations represent the first baseline data about program and unit operations concerning the entire Institute. This process is superior to survey methods, for example, for three reasons: 1) unit members determine what to focus on to improve their own programs--improving the validity of the effort and the buy-in required to implement recommendations; 2) all members of the community are immersed in the evaluation experience, making the process of building a culture of evidence and a community of learners as important as the specific evaluative outcomes; and 3) there is a 100% return rate (as compared with typically low return rates for surveys).

These self-evaluations have already been used to implement specific improvements in program practice. This process has been used to place old problems in a new light, leading to solutions, adaptations, and new activities for the future. It has also been used to reframe existing data from traditional sources, enabling participants to give meaningful interpretation to data they already collect. In addition, self-evaluations have been used to ensure programmatic and academic accountability. For example, the Psychology program decided to discontinue its Ph.D. program as part of the self-evaluation process. This was a significant WASC (accreditation agency) and Institute concern of long standing. The core of the problem was that there weren't enough faculty in the program to properly serve their students. The empowerment evaluation process provided a vehicle for the faculty to come to terms with this problem in an open, self-conscious manner. They were dedicated to serving students properly but when they finally sat down and analyzed faculty-student ratios and faculty dissertation loads the problem became self-evident. (The faculty had complained about the work load and working conditions before but they had never consciously analyzed, diagnosed, and documented this problem because they did not have the time or a simple, nonthreatening mechanism to assess themselves.) Empowerment evaluation provided Institute faculty with a tool to evaluate the program in light of scarce resources and make an executive decision to discontinue the program. Similarly, the all on-line segment of one of the Institute's Ph.D. programs has been administratively merged with a distance learning component of the same program as a result of this self-evaluative process. This was done to provide greater efficiencies of scale, improved monitoring and supervision, and more face-to-face contact with the Institute. (See Fetterman 1996a and 1996b for a description of one of these on-line educational programs.)

The second stage of an empowerment evaluation involved building plans for the future based on these evaluations. All units at the Institute completed their plans for the future, and these data were used to design an overall strategic plan. This process ensures community involvement and commitment to the effort, generating a plan that is grounded in the reality of unit practice. The Provost has institutionalized this process by requiring self-evaluations and unit plans on an annual basis to facilitate program improvement and contribute to institutional accountability.

### **Caveats and Concerns**

**Is Research Rigor Maintained?** This case study presented a picture of how research and evaluation rigor is maintained. Mechanism employed to maintain rigor included: workshops and training, democratic participation in the evaluation (ensuring that majority and minority views are represented), quantifiable rating matrices to create a baseline to measure progress, discussion and definition of terms and ratings (norming), scrutinizing documentation, and questioning findings and recommendations. These mechanism help ensure that program participants are critical, analytical, and honest. Empowerment evaluation is one approach among many being used to address social, educational, industrial, health care, and many other problems. As with the exploration and development of any new frontier, this approach requires adaptations, alterations, and innovations. This does not mean that significant compromises must be made in the rigor

required to conduct evaluations. Although I am a major proponent of individuals taking evaluation into their own hands and conducting self-evaluations, I recognize the need for adequate research, preparation, and planning. These first discussions need to be supplemented with reports, texts, workshops, classroom instruction, and apprenticeship experiences if possible. Program personnel new to evaluation should seek the assistance of an evaluator to act as coach, assisting in the design and execution of an evaluation. Further, an evaluator must be judicious in determining when it is appropriate to function as an empowerment evaluator or in any other evaluative role.

**Does This Abolish Traditional Evaluation?** New approaches require a balanced assessment. A strict constructionist perspective may strangle a young enterprise; too liberal a stance is certain to transform a novel tool into another fad. Colleagues who fear that we are giving evaluation away are right in one respect--we are sharing it with a much broader population. But those who fear that we are educating ourselves out of a job are only partially correct. Like any tool, empowerment evaluation is designed to address a specific evaluative need. It is not a substitute for other forms of evaluative inquiry or appraisal. We are educating others to manage their own affairs in areas they know (or should know) better than we do. At the same time, we are creating new roles for evaluators to help others help themselves.

**How Objective Can a Self-Evaluation Be?** Objectivity is a relevant concern. We needn't belabor the obvious point that science and specifically evaluation have never been neutral. Anyone who has had to roll up her sleeves and get her hands dirty in program evaluation or policy arenas is aware that evaluation, like any other dimension of life, is political, social, cultural, and economic. It rarely produces a single truth or conclusion. In the context of a discussion about self-referent evaluation, Stufflebeam (1994) states,

As a practical example of this, in the coming years U.S. teachers will have the opportunity to have their competence and effectiveness examined against the standards of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and if they pass to become nationally certified. (p. 331)

Regardless of one's position on this issue, evaluation in this context is a political act. What Stufflebeam considers an opportunity, some teachers consider a threat to their livelihood, status, and role in the community. This can be a screening device in which social class, race, and ethnicity are significant variables. The goal is "improvement," but the questions of for whom and at what price remain valid. Evaluation in this context or any other is not neutral--it is for one group a force of social change, for another a tool to reinforce the status quo.

According to Stufflebeam (1994) "Objectivist evaluations are based on the theory that moral good is objective and independent of personal or merely human feelings. They are firmly grounded in ethical principles, strictly control bias or prejudice in seeking determinations of merit and worth..." To assume that evaluation is all in the name of science or that it is separate, above politics, or "mere human feelings"--indeed, that evaluation is objective--is to deceive oneself and to do an injustice to others. Objectivity

functions along a continuum--it is not an absolute or dichotomous condition of all or none. Fortunately, such objectivity is not essential to being critical. For example, I support programs designed to help dropouts pursue their education and prepare for a career; however, I am highly critical of program implementation efforts. If the program is operating poorly, it is doing a disservice both to former dropouts and to taxpayers.

One needs only to scratch the surface of the "objective" world to see that values, interpretations, and culture shape it. Whose ethical principles are evaluators grounded in? Do we all come from the same cultural, religious, or even academic tradition? Such an ethnocentric assumption or assertion flies in the face of our accumulated knowledge about social systems and evaluation. Similarly, assuming that we can "strictly control bias or prejudice" is naive, given the wealth of literature available on the subject, ranging from discussions about cultural interpretation to reactivity in experimental design.

**What About Participant or Program Bias?** The process of conducting an empowerment evaluation requires the appropriate involvement of stakeholders. The entire group--not a single individual, not the external evaluator or an internal manager--is responsible for conducting the evaluation. The group thus can serve as a check on individual members, moderating their various biases and agendas.

No individual operates in a vacuum. Everyone is accountable in one fashion or another and thus has an interest or agenda to protect. A school district may have a 5-year plan designed by the superintendent; a graduate school may have to satisfy requirements of an accreditation association; an outside evaluator may have an important but demanding sponsor pushing either time lines or results, or may be influenced by training to use one theoretical approach rather than another.

In a sense, empowerment evaluation minimizes the effect of these biases by making them an explicit part of the process. The example of a self-evaluation in a performance appraisal is useful again here. An employee negotiates with his or her supervisor about job goals, strategies for accomplishing them, documentation of progress, and even the time line. In turn, the employee works with clients to come to an agreement about acceptable goals, strategies, documentation, and time lines. All of this activity takes place within corporate, institutional, and/or community goals, objectives, and aspirations. The larger context, like theory, provides a lens in which to design a self-evaluation. Self-serving forms of documentation do not easily persuade supervisors and clients. Once an employee loses credibility with a supervisor, it is difficult to regain it. The employee thus has a vested interest in providing authentic and credible documentation. Credible data (as agreed on by supervisor and client in negotiation with the employee) serve both the employee and the supervisor during the performance appraisal process.

Applying this approach to the program or community level, superintendents, accreditation agencies, and other "clients" require credible data. Participants in an empowerment evaluation thus negotiate goals, strategies, documentation, and time lines. Credible data can be used to advocate for program expansion, redesign, and/or improvement. This process is an open one, placing a check on self-serving reports. It

provides an infrastructure and network to combat institutional injustices. It is a highly (often brutally) self-critical process. Program staff members and participants are typically more critical of their own program than an external evaluator, often because they are more familiar with their program and would like to see it serve its purpose(s) more effectively. Empowerment evaluation is successful because it adapts and responds to existing decision-making and authority structures on their own terms (see Fetterman, 1993c). It also provides an opportunity and a forum to challenge authority and managerial facades by providing data about actual program operations--from the ground up. The approach is particularly valuable for disenfranchised people and programs to ensure that their voices are heard and that real problems are addressed.

### **Positions of Privelege**

Empowerment evaluation is grounded in my work with the most marginalized and disenfranchised populations, ranging from urban school systems to community health programs in South African townships, who have educated me about what is possible in communities overwhelmed by violence, poverty, disease, and neglect. They have also repeatedly sensitized me to the power of positions of privilege. One dominant group has the vision, makes and changes the rules, enforces the standards, and need never question its own position or seriously consider any other. In such a view, differences become deficits rather than additive elements of culture. People in positions of privilege dismiss the contributions of a multicultural world. They create rational policies and procedures that systematically deny full participation in their community to people who think and behave differently.

Evaluators cannot afford to be unreflective about the culturally embedded nature of our profession. There are many tacit prejudgments and omissions embedded in our primarily Western thought and behavior. These values, often assumed to be superior, are considered natural. Western philosophies, however, have privileged their own traditions and used them to judge others who may not share them, disparaging such factors as ethnicity and gender. In addition, they systematically exclude other ways of knowing. Some evaluators are convinced that there is only one position and one sacred text in evaluation, justifying exclusion or excommunication for any "violations" or wrong thinking (see Stufflebeam, 1994). Scriven's (1991, p. 260) discussion about perspectival evaluation is instructive in this context, highlighting the significance of adopting multiple perspectives, including new perspectives.

We need to keep open minds, including alternative ways of knowing--but not empty heads. Skepticism is healthy; cynicism, blindness, and condemnation are not, particularly for emerging evaluative forms and adaptations. New approaches in evaluation and even new ways of knowing are needed if we are to expand our knowledge base and respond to pressing needs. As Campbell (1994) states, we should not "reject the new epistemologies out of hand.... Any specific challenge to an unexamined presumption of ours should be taken seriously" (p. 293). Patton (1994) might be right "that the world will not end in a subjective bang, but in a boring whimper as voices of objectivity [drift] off into the chaos" (p. 312).

Evaluation must change and adapt as the environment changes, or it will either be overshadowed by new developments or--as a result of its unresponsiveness and irrelevance--follow the path of the dinosaurs to extinction. People are demanding much more of evaluation and are not tolerant of the limited role of the outside expert who has no knowledge of or vested interest in their program or community. Participation, collaboration, and empowerment are becoming requirements in many community-based evaluations, not recommendations. Program participants are conducting empowerment and other forms of self- or participatory evaluations with or without us (the evaluation community). I think it is healthier for all parties concerned to work together to improve practice rather than ignore, dismiss, and condemn evaluation practice; otherwise, we foster the development of separate worlds operating and unfolding in isolation from each other.

## **Conclusion**

Empowerment evaluation is fundamentally a democratic process. The entire group--not a single individual, not the external evaluator or an internal manager--is responsible for conducting the evaluation. The group thus can serve as a check on its own members, moderating the various biases and agendas of individual members. The evaluator is a co-equal in this endeavor, not a superior and not a servant; as a critical friend, the evaluator can question shared biases or "group think".

As is the case in traditional evaluation, everyone is accountable in one fashion or another and thus has an interest or agenda to protect. A school district may have a five-year plan designed by the superintendent; a graduate school may have to satisfy requirements of an accreditation association; an outside evaluator may have an important but demanding sponsor pushing either timelines or results, or may be influenced by training to use one theoretical approach rather than another. Empowerment evaluations, like all other evaluations, exist within a context. However, the range of intermediate objectives linking what most people do in their daily routine and macro goals is almost infinite. People often feel empowered and self-determined when they can select meaningful intermediate objectives that are linked to larger, global goals.

Despite its focus on self-determination and collaboration, empowerment evaluation and traditional external evaluation are not mutually exclusive--to the contrary, they enhance each other. In fact, the empowerment evaluation process produces a rich data source that enables a more complete external examination. In the empowerment evaluation design developed in response to the school's accreditation self-study requirement presented in this discussion, a series of external evaluations were planned to build on and enhance self-evaluation efforts. A series of external teams were invited to review specific programs. They determined the evaluation agenda in conjunction with department faculty, staff, and students. However, they operated as critical friends providing a strategic consultation rather than a compliance or traditional accountability review. Participants agreed on the value of an external perspective to add insights into program operation, serve as an additional quality control, sharpen inquiry, and improve program practice. External evaluators can also help determine the merit and worth of various



activities. An external evaluation is not a requirement of empowerment evaluation, but it is certainly not mutually exclusive. Greater coordination between the needs of the internal and external forms of evaluation can provide a reality check concerning external needs and expectations for insiders, and a rich data base for external evaluators.

The external evaluator's role and productivity is also enhanced by the presence of an empowerment or internal evaluation process. Most evaluators operate significantly below their capacity in an evaluation because the program lacks even rudimentary evaluation mechanisms and processes. The external evaluator routinely devotes time to the development and maintenance of elementary evaluation systems. Programs that already have a basic self-evaluation process in place enable external evaluators to begin operating at a much more sophisticated level.

A matrix or similar design to further systematize internal evaluation activity facilitates comparison and analysis on a larger scale. Another approach involves a more artistic approach using green and red dots to signify progress or deterioration concerning specific topics of concern. The dots have a strong visual impact and can be quantified. Any system can work if it provides participants with straightforward, user-friendly tools to make credible judgments about where they are at any given point in time; provide consistent patterns (including those with a strong visual impact) that are meaningful to them; facilitate comparison -- across individuals, categories, and programs; and stimulate constructive activity to improve program practice.

Finally, it is hoped that empowerment evaluation will benefit from the artful shaping of our combined contributions rather than follow any single approach or strategy. As Cronbach (1980) urged over a decade ago: "It is better for an evaluative inquiry to launch a small fleet of studies than to put all its resources into a single approach" (p 7).

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