

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The Situated Evaluation: Subverting and (Re)building Methods

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

Evaluation in higher education plays a role in reproducing hegemonic value systems that hold in place deeply inequitable arrangements and structures. In response, the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia is exploring and reimagining how to construct approaches that challenge and undermine these structures of inequity through the methods and methodologies we adopt in evaluation. However, in rebuilding evaluative research practice for this purpose, we foreground that there is no purely equitable approach to evaluation free from producing inequitable arrangements and structures. We bring to projects both personal and professional subjectivities conditioned by the social forces into which we intend to intervene. In this paper, we share from participatory projects operating across different contexts of higher education to problematise aspects of practice in which intersections of identity, culture and power in evaluative research create difficult moments, and possibilities, for methodology and method.

Paper:

Evaluation in higher education arguably plays a key role in reproducing hegemonic value systems that hold in place deeply inequitable arrangements and structures. In response, CEEHE is exploring and reimagining how we might construct approaches that challenge and undermine these structures of inequity through the methods and methodologies we adopt in evaluation. In this paper, we consider a number of theoretical tools that support this work and position the evaluator, and potentially all participants in an evaluation, as able to unveil, foreground and leverage the contested terrain of evaluation methods. In reimagining evaluative research practice for this purpose, we establish that there is no purely equitable approach to or model of evaluation that is free from producing inequitable arrangements and structures. Instead, evaluation is envisaged as a process rather than an end point that responds to ever-changing contexts and dynamics and achieves to varying degrees of success its equity goals. Key to this evaluation-as-process is the role, disposition and understanding of methods on the part of the evaluator. We argue that as evaluators we bring to evaluation projects both personal and professional subjectivities conditioned by the social forces into which we intend to intervene. In this paper, we share from participatory projects operating across different contexts of higher education to problematise aspects of practice in which intersections of identity, culture and power in evaluative research create difficult moments, and possibilities for methodology and method.

Drawing on Lather, we consider how evaluation for equity might contribute to the effort to evade a "worldwide audit culture with its governmental demands for evidence-based practice and the

consequent (re)privileging of scientific methods" (Lather, 2007, p.2). In this, Lather provides us with a more specific context of how evaluation can reproduce inequitable arrangements and structures. By taking this focus, we attempt to critique the confident claims to evidence sought within hegemonic audit cultures. At the same time, we want not to be paralysed between these desires and our awareness of the impurity of evaluation projects given the limits of representation within non-innocent spaces. The methods chosen, and the way they are guided to facilitate participation, become an on-going process of reimagination rather than an end point.

In our ongoing work on evaluation at CEEHE, we have also considered the role 'new' methods (e.g., of engagement, data gathering and/or analysis) can play in evaluative research. We explore this in the context of how the reproduction of hegemonic value systems is facilitated via a problematic politics of knowledge and/or evidence-hierarchy commonly present in evaluative research, particularly in relation to adjudicating the worth, value or impact of social programs intervening in the lives of marginalised individuals and groups. Lather's use of Butler's concept of subversive repetition in the context of methods and methodology allows us to dig into the often subtle and nuanced moments of reproducing hegemonic values. Evaluation reproduces inequitable arrangements by reperforming the values and meanings of the current hegemonic approach to evaluation. One outcome of this is to make invisible certain knowledges and privilege others. For example, key evaluation language terms - such as evidence, impact, value, effective - have their meanings "naturalised" and this helps to place them beyond contestation. Typically, in the design of an evaluation, there is a coercive silencing around these terms through an assumed 'we all know what they mean, so no need to query or discuss'. Whereas discussion around the meaning of these terms is a moment for unveiling the privileged knowledge and understanding that sits within these terms. It is also a moment, along with many others in an evaluation process, to reorient the understanding of a term in order to allow other knowledges to prevail. In this way, the agency of the evaluator to produce other values, outcomes and knowledge lies in these moments of repetition and in the possibility of shifting the meaning and understanding of key evaluation terms and methods.

Via these efforts to develop un/certain methodological commitments and ethical dispositions - not as a guarantee of equitable outcomes but as a striving toward the possibility of a more diverse set of ontological formations - we have encountered and share in this paper our perspective on subtle practices we see as pivotal in this project.

References

Lather, P. (2007). *Getting Lost*. State University of New York Press, Albany.

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