

## **Keynote "Evaluative being(s) and becoming(s)..." Prof. Heila Lotz-Sisitka**

Below is the summary of the keynote addressed by Heila Lotz-Sisitka, Distinguished Professor of Education for Sustainable Development, Rhodes University. Prof. Lotz-Sisitka is Advisory Member to Institute for Sustainable Development and Learning. She holds a Tier 1 South African National Research Foundation/Department of Science and Technology Chair in Global Change and Social Learning Systems, and is a Distinguished Research Professor at Rhodes University.

This keynote was delivered on 16 August 2021 at the opening of the Summer School on “Regenerative Education for Sustainable Development and Evaluation for the Future We Want”. The keynote has been summarized by Thomas Salmon, PhD student at Rhodes University in South Africa.



### **Key points:**

- **Evaluation is a process of 'finding value' / appraising value**
- **Evaluative work lies between 'is' and 'ought'**
- **Finding value is central to being and becoming in-between 'is' and 'ought'**
- **Social science's favoured 'spectator view' of objectivity often reduces the evaluator to the role of observer, commentator and judge. This limits the degree to which we can assess the import of things for people**
- **It is in the context of capability, vulnerability and precarious wellbeing or flourishing and our tendency to form attachments and commitments, that both values and reason in everyday life need to be understood.**
- **In order to address questions of sustainability, climate change, in a context of vulnerability and precariousness we have to bring both values and reason together, we have to appreciate our capability for understanding the situations we are in and being able to reason about those in the everyday.**
- **We need to work with people to look at the real referent for their discourse which needs to be assessed. The evaluator can come in and begin to make an assessment of how that relates to flourishing and suffering and thereby can assist and support people with their evaluative discourses.**
- **The work of the evaluator, by adopting a critical relation to the ideas and practices of those we study, can open up a space for public discussion of what constitutes well-being and those generative mechanisms and structural factors that underly experiences, and how to possibly change these.**
- **It is important to recognise within ESD evaluation that we are monitoring and collectively reviewing and reshaping our own being and becoming in the company of others in the environment(s) we find ourselves.**

- People are capable of reasoning about value judgements in practice, and this is an evaluatively constituted reflexive learning process in the company of others.
- Theory of change approaches give us a tool to think backwards and forwards, between what 'is' and 'ought' and can help to uncover assumptions and make them more explicit, and they can also be complemented or replaced by activity theory or value creation framework approaches.
- This takes us to working more closely with learning and learning theory in and as evaluation processes that work between the 'is' and the 'ought' with others and provides the possibility for evaluation to become re-generative as a process of monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning (MERL).
- We are all evaluative beings capable of reflexivity and re-viewing matters of concern with others and out of this capable of re-generating alternative cultures that reflect 'the futures we want'.



Graphic recording of the keynote session "Re-generative ESD and Evaluation for the Future We Want" made by Louisa Szymorek

### Further detail:

The most important questions we tend to face in our lives are normative ones of what is good or bad, how to act and what to do for the best. We are beings whose relation to the world is one of concern. Yet social science often ignores this relation and hence fails to acknowledge what is most important to people.

Evaluation has morphed into a form of measurement for control and managing people's behaviours and organisations changes and has become more closely associated with the practice of 'judgement', aligned with a managerialist discourse. We need to be careful and critical about the words that we use, how they have transformed and how we use them in contemporary times.

Evaluation is central to being and becoming. The distinction between is and ought, that has dominated thinking about values in social science, allows us to overlook the missing middle, the centrality of evaluation. It obscures the nature of our condition as needy, vulnerable beings, suspended between things as they are and as they might become, for better or worse, as we need or want them to become. (Sayer, 2011)

There is a relationship between positive and normative thought within our everyday practice and life as evaluative beings. However, social science's favoured spectator view of 'objectivity' has produced a separation, a division between positive and normative thought which has become institutionalised by the academic division of labour. This produces evaluators who try to assess the worth and value of others' practices by being cast in the role of observer, commentator, judge with an assumption of 'value neutrality' and 'factual rigour', adopting a fact / value dichotomy.

Values guide us as to what conduct is desirable and what is not, they carry an evaluative meaning for us "because values involve a preference, / choice of a particular thing/ good / action, the desirability of a particular value may vary from one culture to another, from one group to another" (Chakrabarty, 2019)

We need to counter the idea that values are not only subjective but synonymous with 'bias' and distortion, or that they are personal biases that one ideally should confess to, so that others will at least be able to 'take them into account', that is, discount them.

### Theory of change approaches:

A theory of change (ToC) uncovers the assumptions we make about what is possible in reaching a long-term goal. It specifies the connections between program activities and outcomes, and challenges designers of complex community-based initiatives to be specific about their often-implicit theories of how to achieve the change they seek.

As an evaluation strategy the ToC approach involves, 'systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes and context of the initiative' (Connell and Kubish 1998:16). Typically, therefore, evaluators work with actors to explicate the latter's underpinning theory or theories. Once this theory is articulated, evaluators can:



- examine the inherent coherence of the theory
- collect data on the intermediate changes produced by action, and
- assess the extent to which these changes occur as predicted by the theory; and
- collect data on any longer-term outcomes that are generated in the evaluation period.

Rather than being imported into the evaluation by the evaluators or some external sponsors, outcomes are articulated by the actors in the initiative, albeit in negotiation with the evaluators (Weiss, 1995)

The TOC approaches contain a predictive element about what outcomes might be anticipated – and this question cannot be answered without building in assumptions about how the current situation will develop in future. However, if you treat it as a technology and not as a kind of co-engaged learning process with others, you can ‘miss’ the important work that needs to be done by the evaluator to co-construct change with participants.

Example: Dyson and Todd, 2010:

*Dealing with Complexity: Theory of Change Evaluation and the Full-Service Extended Schools Initiative.* International Journal of Research and Method in Education. International Journal of Research and Method in Education 2010, 33-2 119-134



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