Article Review

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2001). *Guidelines and Checklist for Constructivist (a.k.a. Fourth Generation) Evaluation*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2005 from www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/constructivisteval.htm

Guba and Lincoln began their article with a definition of evaluation, one of "the three basic forms of disciplined inquiry" (p. 1)[1]. According to these authors, evaluation is the determination of "worth" or "merit" of an evaluand: merit judges its intrinsic qualities, while worth judges its extrinsic usefulness in a specific setting.

Constructivist evaluation is based on the Constructivist Paradigm, which comprises three basic assumptions:

- ontological – relativism; no "objective" truth; humans must organize experiences to make them "comprehensible, understandable, and explainable" (p. 1);

- epistemological – transactional subjectivism; "reality" and "truth" derive from the meanings associated by the reviewer and the "degree of sophistication" of the evaluators (p. 1);

- methodological – "hermeneutic-dialecticism" (negotiation), the process used for evaluation; all stakeholders use a specific method for judging the evaluand: expose, research and attempt to quantify, then "confront, compare, and contrast" the data in "encounter situations" (p. 1).

The authors note that Constructivist evaluations do not differentiate between qualitative and quantitative, since "[b]oth types of methods may be and often are appropriate in all forms of evaluative inquiries" (p. 1). They also warn against "mixing and matching" paradigms when conducting an evaluation, as it can lead to "nonsense approaches and conclusions" (p. 2). Additionally, Constructivist evaluations must meet two essential conditions:

- organized by "claims, concerns, and issues of stakeholding audiences" (p. 2);

- utilize "methodology of the Constructivist paradigm" as described above (p. 2).

Constructivist evaluations require two phases that "are not necessarily sequential, but may overlap or be carried out in parallel" (p. 2):

- Discovery – "represents the evaluator's effort to describe 'what's going on here,' the 'here' being the evaluand and its context" (p. 2). The Discovery phase can be skipped if previous <u>constructivist</u> findings are available on which evaluators can build.

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[1]The others are research and policy analysis.

- Assimilation – "the evaluator's effort to incorporate new discoveries into the existing construction(s)," if they exist (p. 2). In the Assimilation phase, evaluators must ensure the evaluation findings incorporate old and new data, provide a method for resolving the problem(s), and can be themselves modified.

The authors identify several important responsibilities of the Constructivist evaluator:

- "Seek out all stakeholders," those who are "at risk" in the evaluand (p. 2).

- Gather information from the stakeholders "about the form and process of the evaluand and the range of claims, concerns, and issues" they have (p. 3).

- Develop the context and methodology for evaluating and presenting the findings so all aspects of the evaluand and all stakeholder issues are addressed.

- Achieve consensus about as many constructions as possible, including related "claims, concerns, and issues" of stakeholders (p. 3).

- Identify points where no consensus is possible and "[p]repare an agenda for negotiation" to identify additional evaluation needs and procedures (p. 3).

- Create a forum for stakeholders to meet and negotiate unresolvable items.

- Gather, and provide stakeholders with, information identified during the negotiation.

- Generate a report ("probably several targeted reports") to provide stakeholders with consensus items and resolutions to their "claims, concerns, and issues" (p. 3).

- "Recycle the evaluation to take up still unresolved constructions and their attendant claims, concerns, and issues" (p. 3).

The final point, recycle, is a fundamental tenet of Constructivist evaluations.

The authors address three additional important factors and provide procedural checklists for them: "Contracting for a Constructivist Evaluation" (p. 3); "Conducting the Constructivist Evaluation/Use of the Hermeneutic/Dialectic Methodology" (p. 5); and "Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Constructivist Evaluations and Reports" (p. 6). All three checklists identify vital considerations.

In the first checklist, "Contracting," the authors list essential steps that protect both the evaluator and the stakeholders/contracting party(ies). In Constructivist evaluations, this is critical, because there are numerous points of failure because of the possible predisposition of stakeholders/contractors to a more-structured paradigm, especially the Scientific/Positivist.

The second checklist provides a procedural reference for evaluators using the Constructivist paradigm so they do not make critical errors resulting from (a) assumptions regarding the knowledge and sophistication of stakeholders; and, (b) failure to provide information the stakeholders want and/or need.

The third checklist is prefaced with the following statement that sums up perfectly the requirement for the first two checklists: "Standards normally applied in making quality judgements of evaluations … are inappropriate for constructivist evaluations." The authors' quality measures stem from "'parallel' criteria (sometimes called 'trustworthiness' or 'foundational' criteria)" that arise from Scientific/Positivism: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (pp. 6-7). They also identify measures of authenticity that "are based directly on the assumptions of constructivism and are responsive to the hermeneutic/dialectic aspects": fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (p. 7).

The authors provide guidelines for producing Constructivist Evaluation Reports. They also focus on the importance of the evaluator's dual roles, "advocate and educator," because of the diversity found among stakeholders and stakeholders' unfamiliarity with the hermeneutic/dialectic (negotiation) process, a primary tenet of Constructivism. "The required balance between these roles is delicate, and the evaluator will need to exercise great care to avoid bias and favoritism" (p. 7).

Additionally, the authors warn that "Constructivist evaluation is a difficult model to adopt" because it is

- extremely labor-intensive;

- perpetually recursive;

- routinely "adversarial and confrontational";

- impossible to describe in detail;

- difficult for evaluators because they must assume a variety of roles;

- impossible to complete by its very nature, since generalizations and generic, "best-fit" solutions are outside the paradigm (p. 8).

Guba and Lincoln conclude their description of Constructivist evaluations with a wonderful description of the model that matches the Good-to-Great Team's own Learning Model: its constructions "fit, work, demonstrate relevance, and exhibit continuing modifiability" (p. 8). Constructivist evaluations are also cross-cultural and, when performed properly, have no political or social bias – fundamentals of education, according to the Good-to-Great Team.