Nerd's Corner: A Short Guide to Evaluative Thinking

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Introductions

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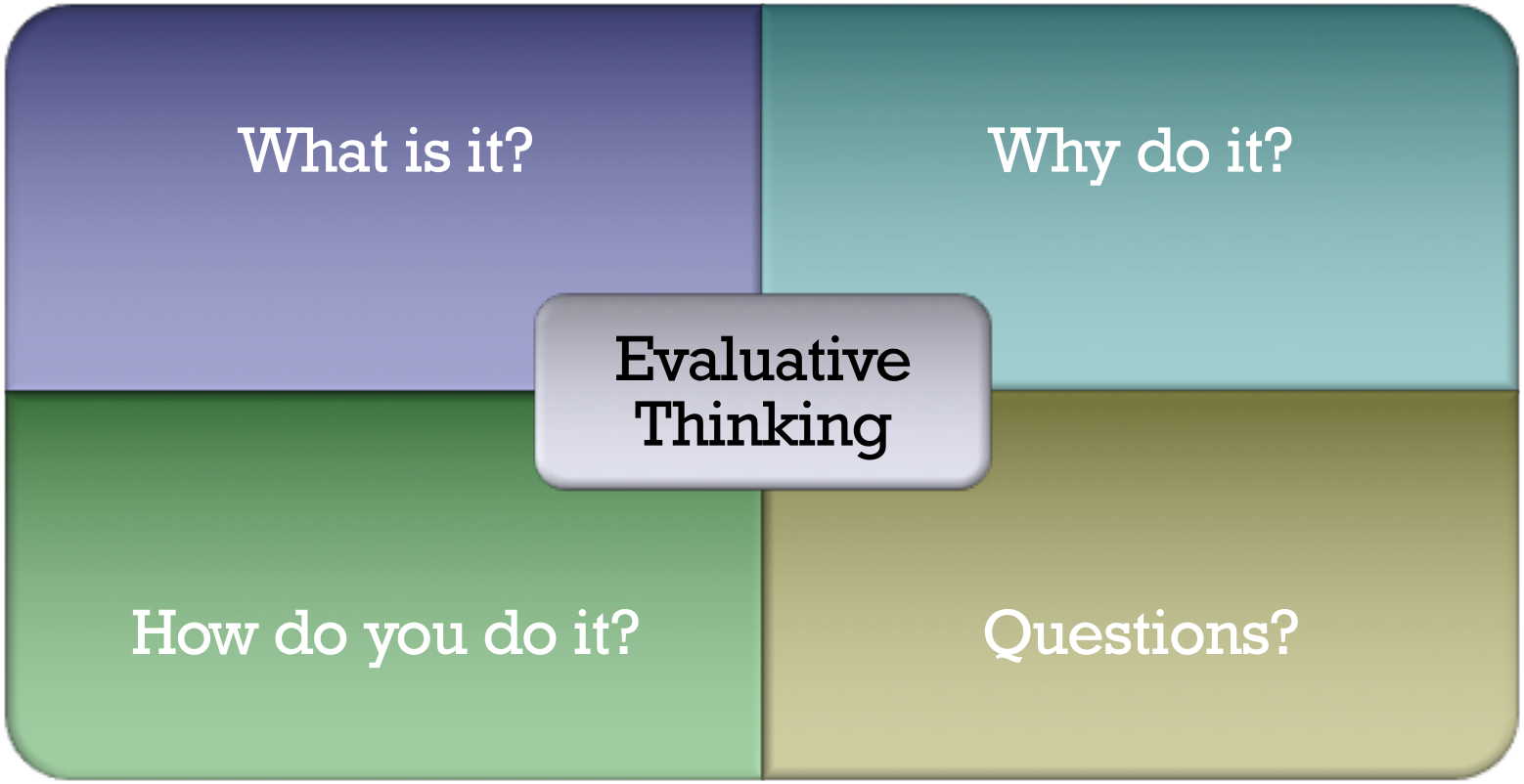
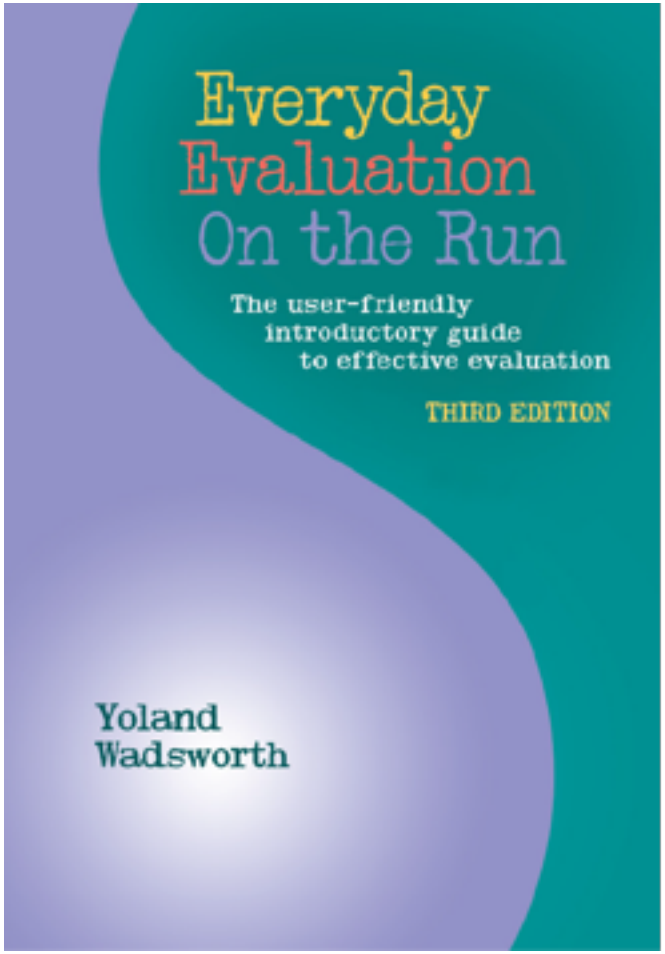
Community-University Partnership
for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families

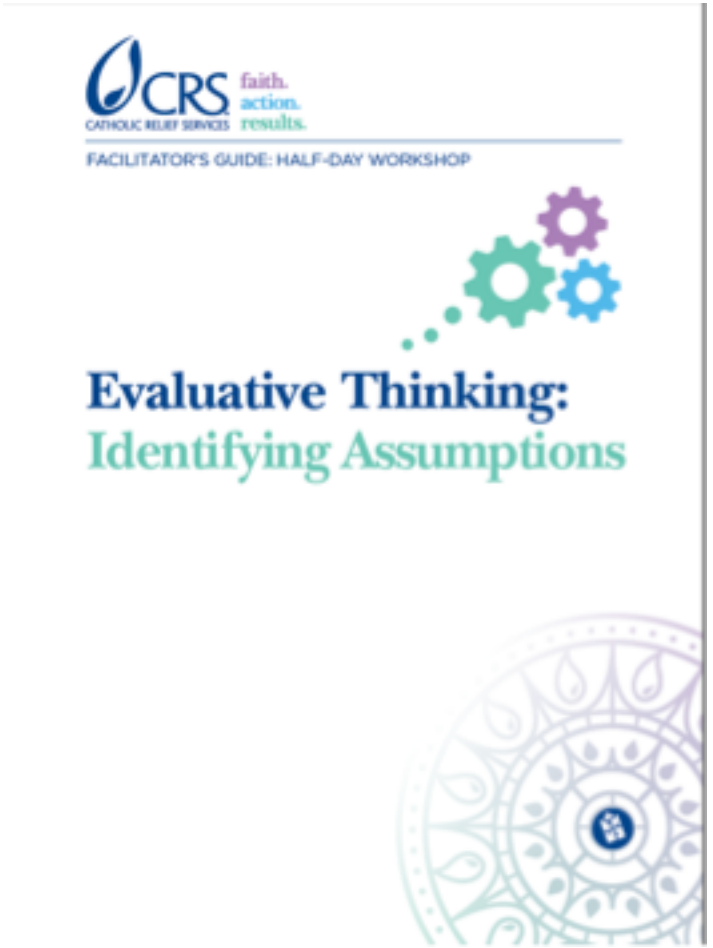
EVALUATION
CAPACITY
NETWORK

Webinar Outline



+ Main Sources





Everyday Examples

Getting out of bed in the morning:

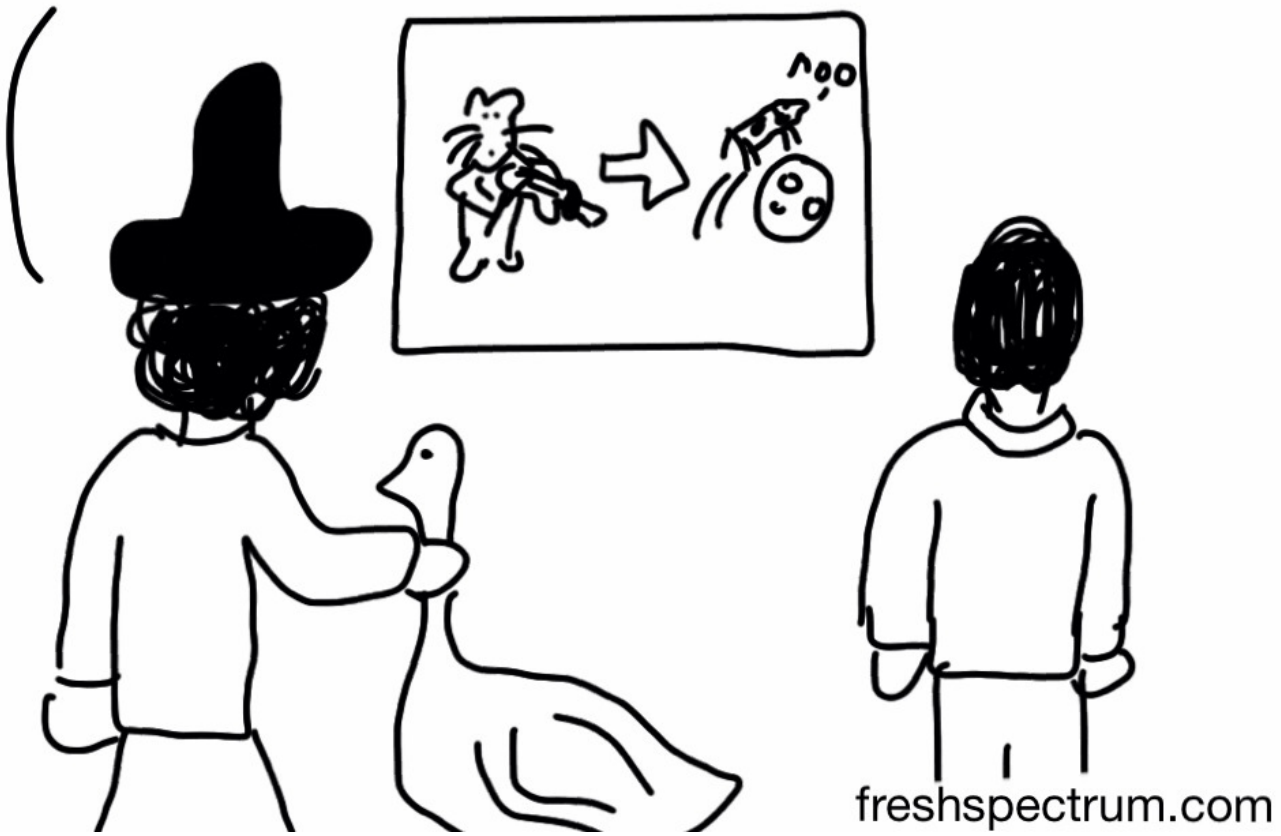
- Evaluate whether to hit snooze
- Judgement about the weather
- A brief review of the previous day's events
- Noticing the irritating socks on the floor from two days ago
- An anticipatory assessment of today's tasks and tonight's dinner.
- Judging the best route to your morning meeting

Evaluative Thinking (ET)

A willingness to ask: "**How do we know what we think we know?** … Evaluative thinking is not just limited to evaluation projects…it's an analytical way of thinking that **infuses everything** that goes on."

Patton; cited in Archibald and Buckley, from http://aea365.org/blog/tom-archibald-and-jane-buckley-on-evaluative-thinking-the-je-ne-sais-quoi-of-evaluation-capacity-building-and-evaluation-practice/

You're right, after thinking it through,
I'm not sure how the one leads to the other



ET is **critical thinking** applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of **inquisitiveness** and a belief in the **value of evidence**, that involves:

- ✓ Identifying assumptions,
- ✓ Posing thoughtful questions,
- ✓ Pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking,
- ✓ And making informed decisions in preparation for action.

- Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves, & Trochim (2015). Defining and Teaching Evaluative Thinking: Insights from Research on Critical Thinking. *American Journal of Evaluation*

Conventional Evaluation

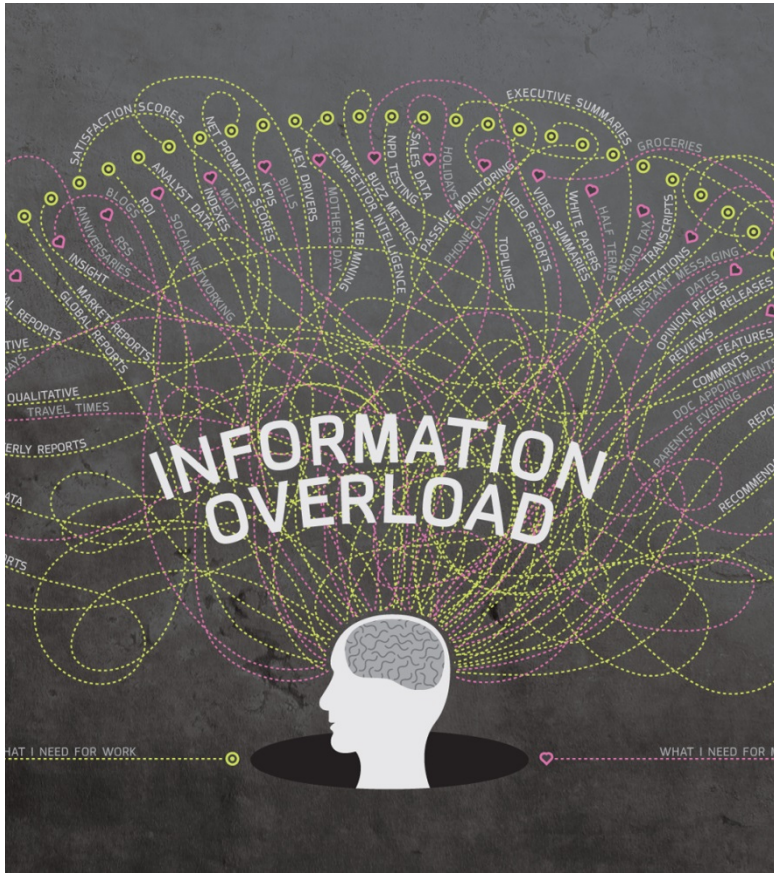
Money

Necessary

Expertise

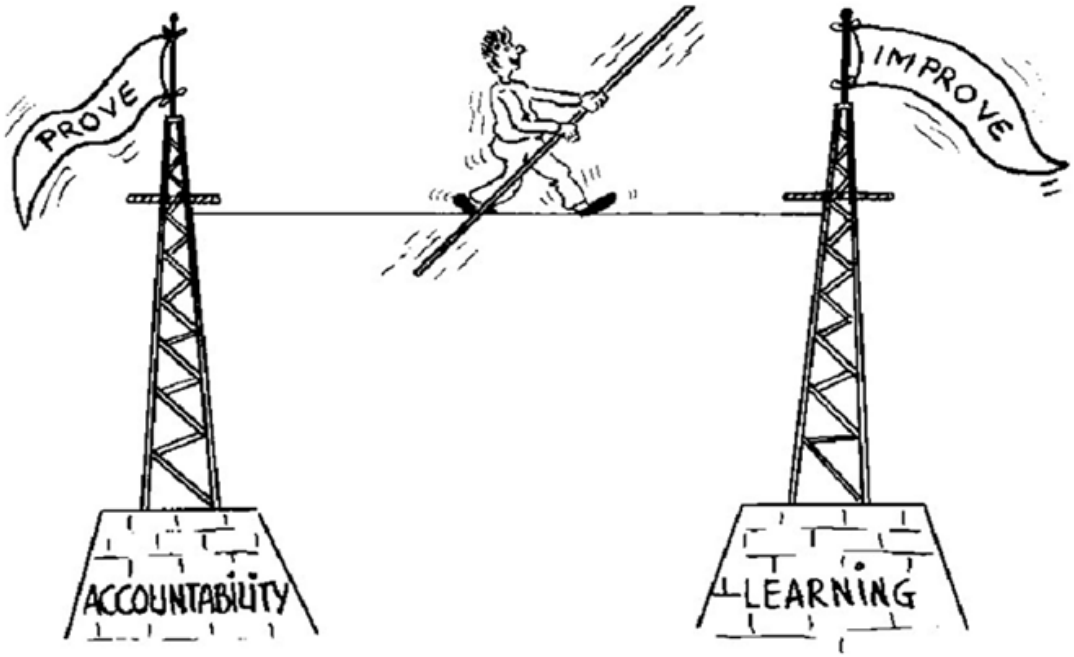
Time

Why is ET important?



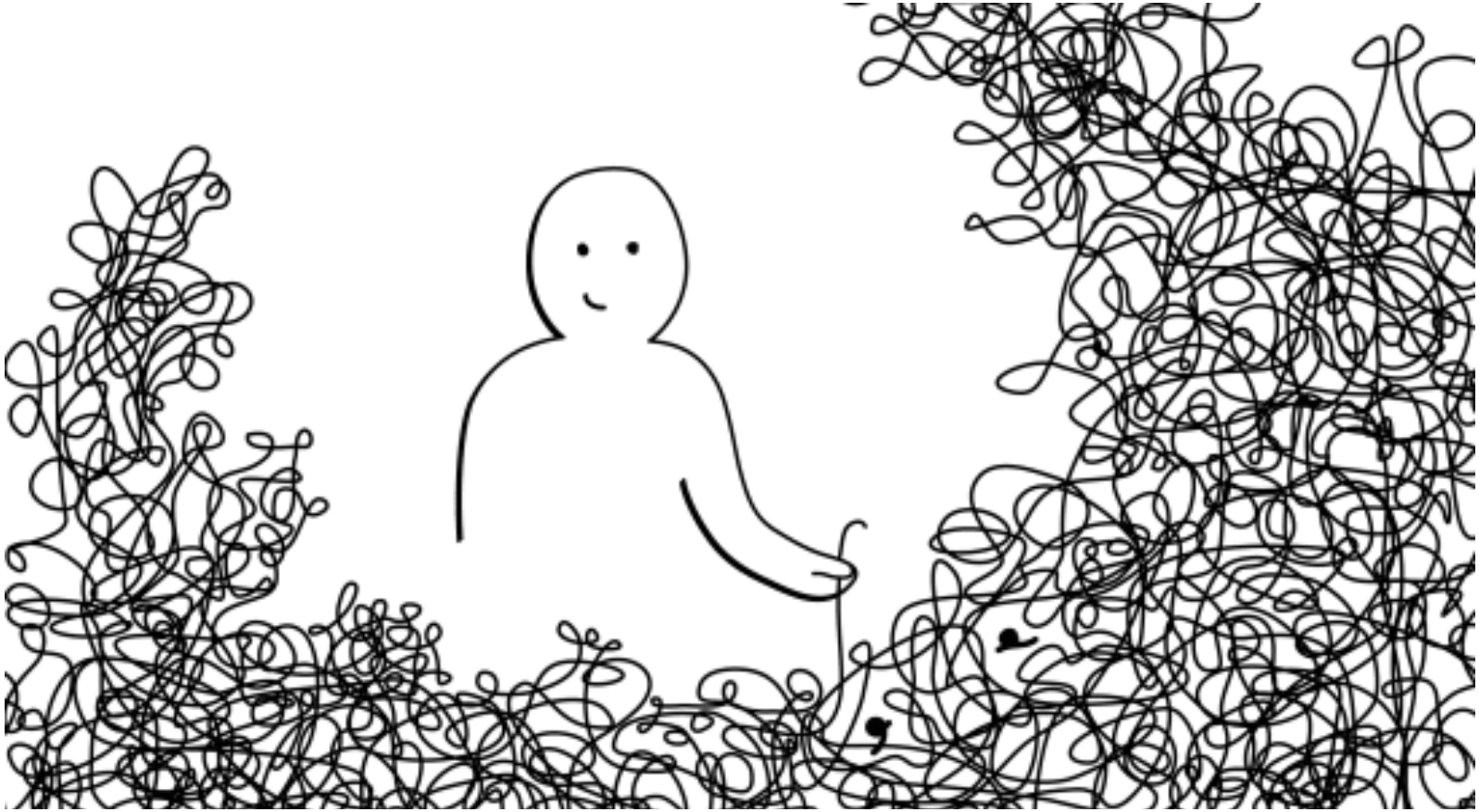
Critical Reference Group

Learning as the Focus

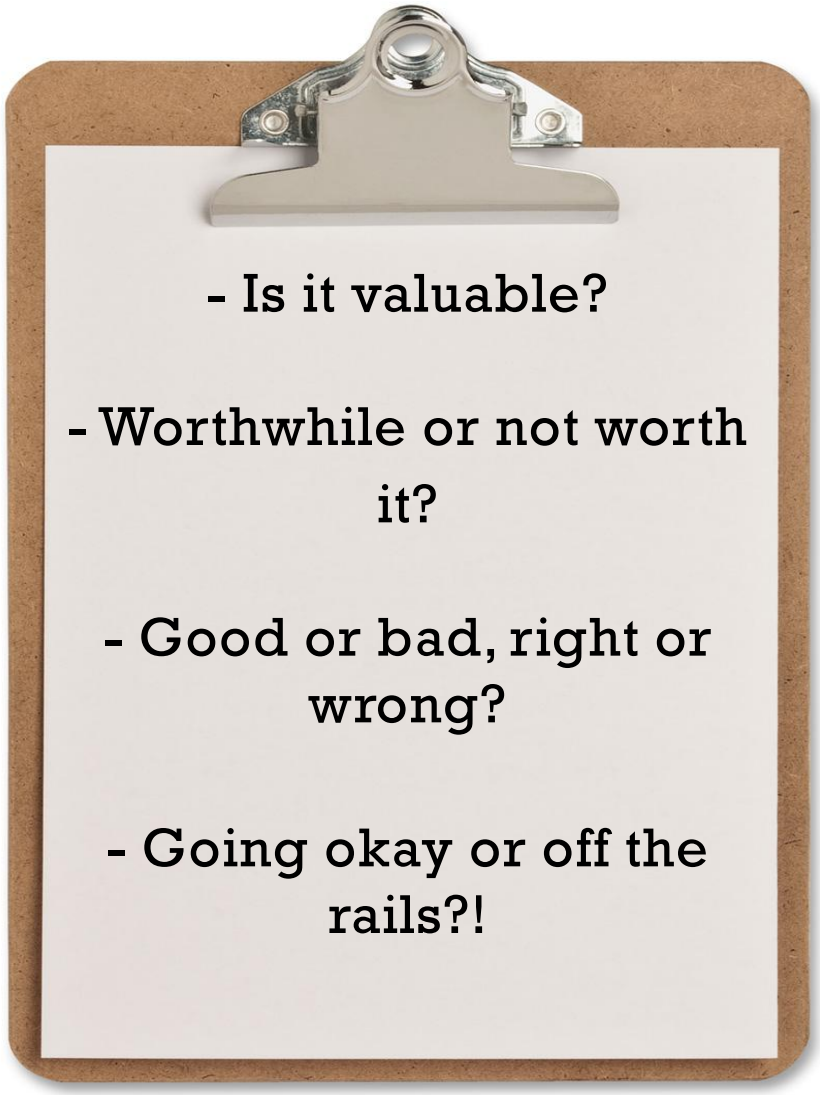


Source: Terry Smutylo & Daniel Morales-Gomez

Stepping outside the messiness



Evaluating Worth or Value



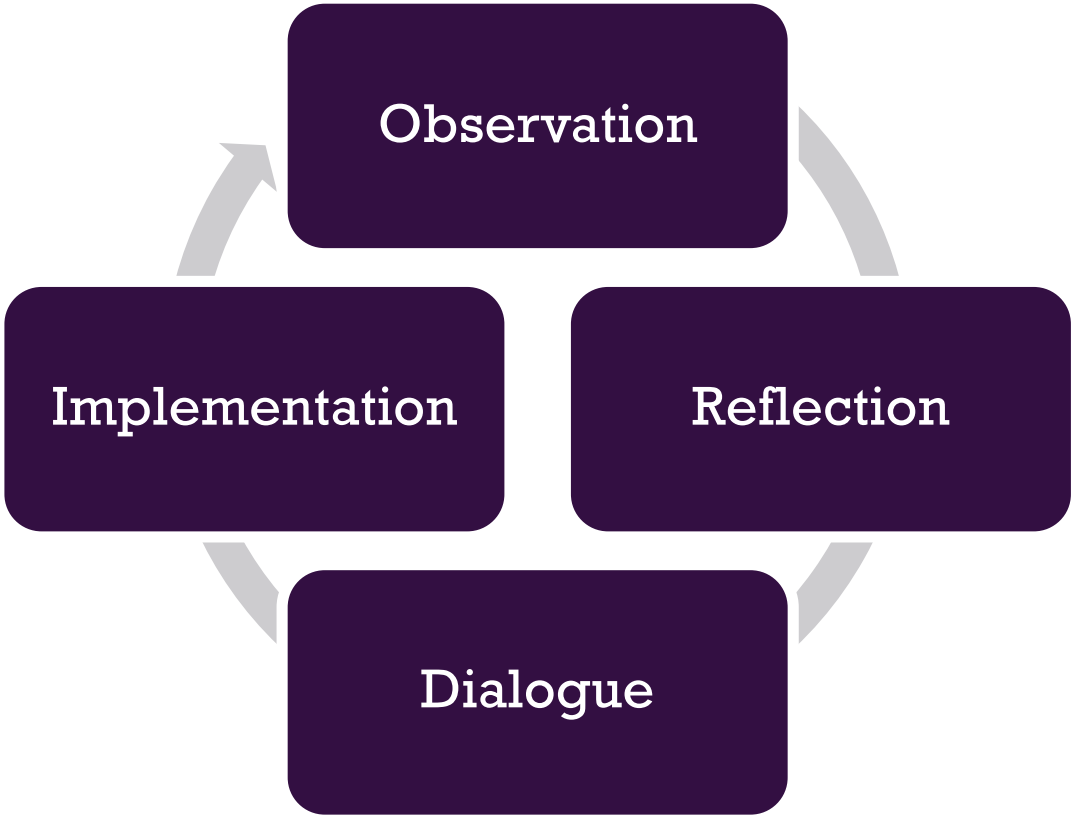
…attractive, difficult, exciting, off-putting, useful, undesirable, important, functional, effective, boring, expensive, too much, too little, just right, interesting, too simple, much too complex or a disaster…

Noticing Discrepancies

The need for evaluation arises in the discrepancy between what 'is' and what 'ought' (or 'ought not') to be.

- A split between what we expected or didn't expect
- What we wanted and didn't want
- What we planned and what actually occurred

Cycle(s) of learning



Example Questions

Smaller scope:

- How did that activity go? Why?
- Did it go as I expected or intended? Why?
- Is there anything I could do differently next time so it would be better?
- What was the context? What else was going on wider afield that may relate to this?

Larger scope:

- What are the program's strengths and weaknesses?
- What works and what doesn't (and why)?
- Where are opportunities for improvement?
- Are participants getting what they need?

Always ask…

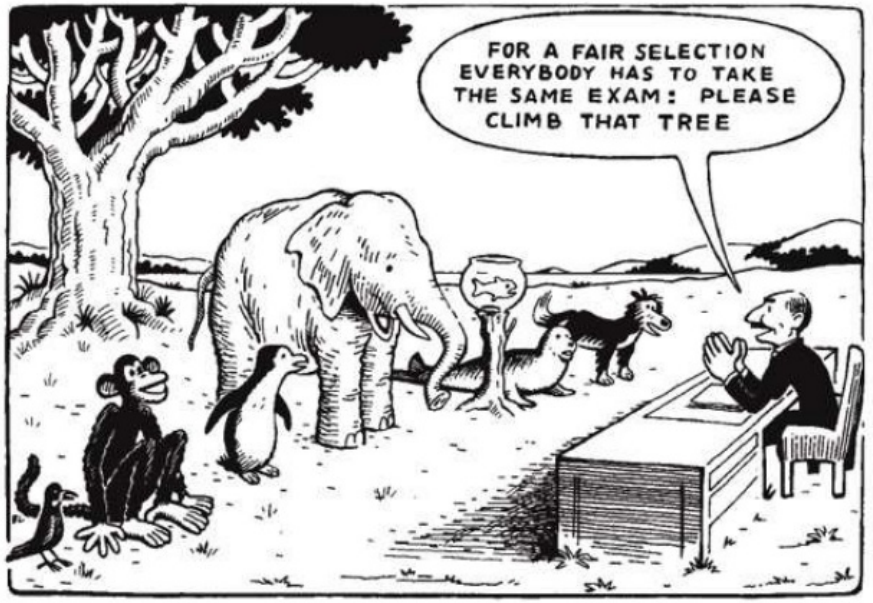
"… in relation to what?"

Purpose

Objectives

Outputs

Outcomes



Some Tools to Support Evaluative Thinking

Simple ways to capture 'data'

Formal	Informal
Document analysis	Review case notes, annual reports, strategic plans, theories of change
Focus groups	Reflective team meetings (monthly/annual), participant groups (e.g. arts-based learning)
Individual interviews	Staff review meetings, home visit
Surveys and assessment	Snapshot surveys, polling,
Participant Observation	Daily personal reflection, participant data (e.g. program entry)

Critical Thinking Guide

Who

- Benefits from this?
- Is this harmful to?
- Makes decisions about this?
- Is most directly affected?
- Is missing?

What

- Are the strengths/weaknesses?
- Is another perspective?
- Is another alternative?
- Would be a counter-argument?

Adaptive Cycle

- Knowing where you are at

Personal Reflection Journal

- How did that go?
- Did it go as I expected or intended? Why (not)?
- Is there anything I could do next time so it would be better?

Monthly Team Meetings

Reflective questions on an agenda:

What has changed since the last meeting?

What currently works well and why?

What do we want to do more of?

What is one thing that has challenged you in the last month?

What is not working well and why?

What could we change to make it better?

What should we do less of?

Annual reflection meetings

Looking Back:

- Where have we been?

- What have we achieved?

Looking Forward:

- Where do we want to go next?

- How do we want to get there?

Snapshot survey

That you learned today

That is unclear

That felt redundant

That will be useful to you

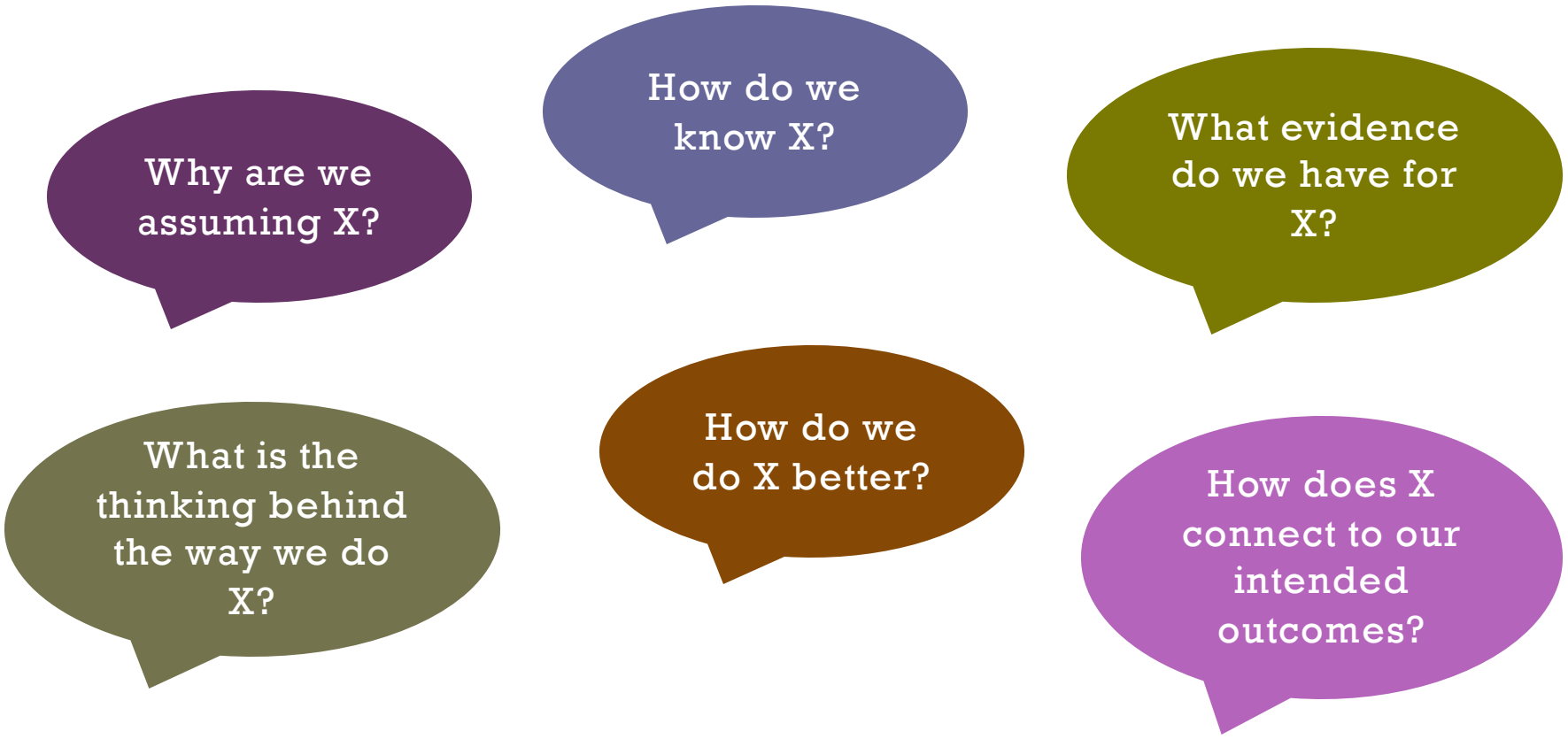
Quick poll

Which 'method' do you think is most useful in your work?

1. Personal reflection journal
2. Monthly team meetings
3. Annual reflection meetings
4. Snapshot surveys
5. None of them
6. All of them

Evaluative Thinking in Action

You know evaluative thinking is happening when you hear things like:



Free-Range Evaluation…

…is evaluative thinking that lives unfettered in an organization…. It is made stronger by freely moving among people, programs, and special projects, taking sustenance from its natural surroundings. Its vulnerability is also a strength: If it survives the challenges it confronts, it becomes stronger.

King (2007). Developing evaluation capacity through process use. *New Directions for Evaluation, 116,* 45-69.

Thanks for Listening!

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