ICPIC Conference (Padua, 2-4 July 2009)

Evaluation in and on P4C: an epistemological point of view
Antonio Cosentino

SUMMARY
My reflections will be focused on the epistemological dimension of evaluation in and on P4C. In this sense I’m looking for some answers to questions like the following:
“In which kind of knowledge-theory has to be included the evaluation concerning P4C?”, “Which is the function to be assigned to the evaluation in and on P4C?”, “Who evaluates and from what point of view?”. When evaluation becomes a professional performance aimed at assessing a program, it makes ends and means separated and the main value which works as criterion for evaluation appears to be the success of a product. Such kind of evaluation is applied from the outside on selected outcomes of a whole process and reveals its positivistic roots.
On the contrary, from the inside of the process, evaluation assumes different meanings and functions. It works as in a “game”, a social practice that becomes capable of self-evaluation, once a course of reflection is set going. In order to transform a customary, habitual and traditional practice in a reflective practice is needed a facilitator able to grasp the end-in-view on the ground of his/her competences in assessing the boundaries of the zone of proximal development of the “community of inquiry” (COI). In this perspective, evaluation appears as nothing but one side of the complex thinking which takes place and, as far as its general direction, it accords with a constructivist epistemology.
From this point of view, evaluation specifically expresses the caring-side of thinking either as prizing or as appraising attitude. This means that it keeps together the two basic meanings of the term “value”: the former denoting, as noun, something being valuable apart from any activity, the latter denoting, as verb, the activity of assigning value to something.
To conclude, I see the possibility to carry on an evaluation on P4C as a professional external activity which could affect P4C in a way of turning it into a mere thinking skills project useful for several different purposes. However, I still underline, in a very different scenario, the value of evaluating activity occurring in the P4C social practice, by which P4C can really work as a sort of not suspect overthrow.

1. Evaluation as professional performance
Before going on I briefly want to mention the fact that, generally speaking, evaluation seems to be a very widespread activity around our society, both in public institutions and in private area. The number of organizations that develop specific competence for evaluation is rapidly increasing around the world: evaluation has become a profession. It was after World War II that social programs in education, in public health or other areas became widespread activity of social sciences. Programs for family planning in Asia, nutrition and health care in Latin America, and agricultural and community development in Africa were strongly committed with systematic evaluation, while expanding knowledge of the methods of social research made possible large-scale
Evaluation studies. During the 1970s evaluation research emerged as a distinct field in the social sciences. In fact, the first journal in evaluation, “Evaluation Review”, was launched in 1976 by Stage Publications. Evaluation has been sustained primarily by funding from policymakers, program planners, administrators who use the findings and by the interests of the general public and the clients of the program evaluated. Among the main professional associations around the world we can mention someone of the most influential, like American Evaluation Association, American Educational Research Association (Evaluation Division), European Evaluation Society, Italian Evaluation Society.

As we move into the 21st century, regardless of political trends, two points seem clear about the current environment for evaluation. First, restraints on resources will continue to require funders to choose the social problem areas on which to concentrate resources and the programs that should be given priority. Second, intensive scrutiny of existing programs will continue because of the pressure to curtail or dismantle those that do not demonstrate that they are effective and efficient. Moreover, both dissatisfactions with existing programs and shifts in political currents will result in new programs that come forward with promises of being more effective and less costly. All these circumstances create an important role for evaluation research. We can characterize the kind of evaluation that professional organizations provide as one concerned with using monitoring and other information collected to make judgments about a project. It is also about using the information to make changes and improvements. So, from this point of view, we can highlight two different aims of the evaluation:
1. For learning and development. It helps assessing how well you are doing in order to help you do it better.
2. For accountability. It is to show others that you are effective. Funders want to know whether they have spent money appropriately. There is pressure from funders to provide them with evidence of success. Many projects have to respond to this demand in order to survive.

In other words, as Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman point out, "Program evaluation is the use of social research methods to systematically investigate the effectiveness of social intervention programs in ways that are adapted to their political and organizational environments and are designed to inform social action to improve social conditions". In both cases the trend I’m illustrating sets, above all, a question about standards. In general, no evaluation is accomplished without standards. The point to which we have to pay attention is concerned with criteria by which we construct the standards. We can also wonder about the meta-criteria we use to choice the criteria. Along such going back from standards to criteria to meta-criteria and so on, we necessarily meet the ground of values. So we can say that, when we carry on an evaluating process both for “learning and development” and for “accountability”, the grounding value is the success that, in turn, has the figure of a product.

---

2 Rossi H.-Lipsey M. W.-Freeman H. E., cit., p. 16.
From the above perspective, ends (product) and means (processes) are separated, in such a sense that means are not included in the list of criteria employed in order to fix the ends and, generally speaking, the ends are decided by agencies which are on the outside of the playground. If this is the case, then, evaluation may appear as a kind of power addressed to contextualized processes from an external point of view. This is also what happens with traditional scholastic assessment, when it actually does nothing but checking the changes and general effects caused by its own action.

2. The “game” of P4C as social practice
Now let suppose that some observer/assessor assumes a game (chess game, but also football, or something else) as the context to be evaluated. In this case evaluation from the outside doesn’t make sense for the players, because the assessor is not able of making his evaluation respected by them during the game and yet it will be without any consequences after the game is ended. The only evaluation that makes sense while the game is in progress can be the one performed by the players, a different kind of evaluation. It is different firstly because it is situated in the inside of the context; secondly because it works as self-evaluation. In addition it’s worth noticing that, in a game, relationships between means and ends are very different: they are strongly interlaced, as well as ends are always “ends-in-view”, to quote John Dewey. They never are ends in themselves, except for the end just as to “come to an end” of the game.

No doubt that a game is a well regulated practice, even thought, viewed in the sense of “play”, suddenly shows spaces for creativity, free interpretations of rules, construction of unique stories and of horizons of sense. As such it can be comprehended and interpreted comparing it with the concept of “frame”, as well as with the Wittgenstein’s “linguistic game”, that is, a recognizable specific setting, an environment including constraints and possibilities. In any case, what seems to be apparent is that a “practice” comprises a “tacit dimension”, a background that tends to remain unconscious and unexamined. As Lipman maintains, “practice is to action as belief is to thought. Beliefs are thoughts we are convinced of despite the fact that we do not continually question them; practice is what we do methodically and with conviction but without a conspicuous degree of inquiry or reflection.”

---

7 Ceruti M., Il vincolo e la possibilità, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2005.
What I want to hold here is that P4C is basically a “practice”, a “social practice”\textsuperscript{10}. Accepting this leading-idea, our analysis will tend to underline the value of the context, of the socially distributed knowledge, of the inquiry as action research aimed to promote desirable changes among the participants. Such an outcome is achievable only from the inside. In this view the threshold between research and action becomes so thin as to make possible a fruitful reversal from action-research to research-action. Since evaluation comes to be embedded in the whole experience process, it represents nothing but the caring side of a kind of reflection that is definitely in-action\textsuperscript{11}, becoming action in itself reflective. When this point of view is chosen, our inquiry on evaluation will be necessarily steered toward a set of consequences.

Firstly, it means that patterns having positivistic roots are definitely excluded, so that P4C cannot be intended as a theory that expects to be put into practice, according to logic of mere application. Secondly, the kind of “practice” which we refer to takes place as a piece of experience where acting and knowing, feeling and thinking are not separated; a fragment of common reflective life marked out by key-words such as complexity, circular relationships, a stream of actions and responses, uncertainty and unpredictability, a variety of registers (explicit, tacit, cognitive, emotional, individual, social, etc.).

Finally, a living practice shows itself as a story. In this respect, to evaluate doesn’t mean to establish whether an event is true or false, appropriate or not against a definite standard. To focus on narrative approach is to pay attention to making sense activities. Evaluating is, then, a meaningful reconstruction of the plot when the play has come to an end; it is to build a qualitative judgment on what has happened, recognizing what was of value and what wasn’t, mapping out the lines of relations and interactions between parts of the process on the light of the final result.

In the whole context of a living practice valuational thinking really occurs when things fall into some \textit{impasse} that makes the situation be problematic. It is when situations become uncertain and indeterminate that reflection comes out and evaluation acts arise that provide for torn parts of the experience, in order to clarify and organize them in a new order.

This idea of evaluation appears consistent with a constructivist epistemological paradigm that assumes complexity as the horizon to be faced. As in a game, what happens is:

- The assessing observer is situated within the observed scene and, therefore, its observation/evaluation is not a pure act of mirroring and of comparing an abstract model to the data empirically observed; it is an effective action that contributes to change the observed and evaluated scene, not as an external power but as a self-evaluating attitude;

- The evaluation criteria cannot be set in an abstract and decontextualized way, but they are to be defined historically within the micro-culture of the COI, where they are exposed to endless negotiations and adjustments;

The evaluation outcomes are means for the “ends-in-view” of the ongoing inquiry and for the endless cognitive and socio-relational re-balancing inside the COI;

The evaluation is qualitative and, therefore, it nourishes itself on a widespread hermeneutical exercise where the understanding (verstehen) is of primary importance.

3. Evaluation as caring thinking

Now, do we have to conclude that it is not admissible any kind of evaluation on P4C? Well, it is so, if the evaluation is built on criteria and ends defined by vocabularies extrinsic to P4C. It is yet so, if someone would claim to evaluate P4C in terms of standardized proficiencies (using tests, for ex. NJTRS or others similar).

To better clarify my statement, I want to underline the radical difference between an assessment on P4C managed from the outside and the evaluation in P4C, rising from the inside. The former is practicable anyway by some professional assessor, but it is not to be admitted in the field of practice of P4C. The latter, on the other hand, appears already at the beginning of P4C practice, for it is just one side of the inquiry and, what is more, because promoting the starting and the growing of a COI implies an option of ethical importance.

It is an act of prizing towards the P4C curriculum that gives rise to the operations requested for its implementation. Anyway, far from being a value in and by itself, P4C, as an ongoing actual dialogical process, has to be appraised as far as it is concerned the relationships between means and ends-in-view12. Reflection and evaluation are two components or moments inside the same process of thinking engaged with inquiry. In this sense the kind of evaluation I’m speaking about is exactly one of the forms of Lipman’s caring thinking and, at the same time, it includes a clear reference to Dewey’s Theory of evaluation.

Quoting Lipman, “John Dewey has pointed out that we must distinguish between prizing and appraising, between esteeming and estimating, between valuing and evaluating. To value is to appreciate, to cherish, to hold dear; to evaluate is to calculate the worth of. The difference between prizing and appraising, as well as between pairs of similar terms, is a difference of degree: there is no prizing that does not contain at least a germ of appraisal and no appraisal that does not contain at least a germ of prizing”13.

So, if it is one of the teacher’s desires to transform the classroom in a COI, evaluation begins by paying attention to the general conditions and available resources as the necessary means to start the activity. When philosophical dialogue is in progress several points of evaluation take place. Each participant will be evaluating his/her own position among the others COI’s members, or can be interested in evaluating the contextual quality and general climate, a sort of valuation closely connected with

12 Examining the terms prizing and appraising as two different meaning of the word value (as a verb), Dewey maintains that it is a mistake to refer the former to supposed independent values and the latter exclusively to the domain of means. His concept of “ends-in-view” allows going beyond the traditional dualistic approach: “wherever there is an end-in-view of any sort whatever, there is an affective-ideational-motor activity; or, in terms of the dual meaning of valuation, there is union of prizing and appraising” (Theory of valuation, cit., p. 218).

emotional stance and feeling. Nevertheless it is worth to distinguish the proper self-evaluation from a different kind of internal evaluation. In fact, there is a difference between the assessment that actors make about themselves as well about the whole activity in which they are embedded and an assessment made by an actor (facilitator) who is located inside the group but doesn’t wholly participate in the common processes of inquiry.\(^{14}\)

The latter assessment is shaped on the light of ends-in-view that the facilitator can imagine in action moving from the state of the inquiry and, at the same time, going beyond it. In this sense the facilitator’s evaluation is caring and creative because it is founded, on one hand, on paying careful attention to what the community is dealing with and, on the other hand, on thinking of what can be challenging in order to meet higher level of reflection. We can say that both evaluation perspectives – the proper self-evaluation and the internal evaluation performed by the facilitator, a “certain view of personhood and a pedagogical process”\(^{15}\) - are in P4C practice, even though the facilitator’s evaluation appears different because of his/her “technical” competences that allow him/her to recognize the borders of the COI’s zone of proximal development\(^{16}\) and to operate consequently as an efficient scaffolding.

To conclude, I believe that the ultimate question is whether we consider P4C just as a good piece of pedagogy to be added and integrated into the traditional curricula of the education systems and, therefore, to be evaluated against general and external criteria and standard or whether, on the contrary, we consider it as a sort of not suspect overthrow, a groundbreaking practice, a game having its own rules and purposes. In other words, whether we put it along a line of continuity with movements and voices of criticism against traditional education (Illich, Freire, non-authoritarian practices tried during the ’68 movement) or we think of it as a task aligned with the education managed as a tool of the established powers. What is at stake is the choice between two different models of education: on the one hand the model carried out by the western modernity, on the other hand a model of education as a “practice of freedom”\(^{17}\); on the one hand a school as a “discipline and punishment” device\(^{18}\) which claims to hold a monopoly of education, on the other hand an idea of education as a complex of learning processes distributed in a variety of places and times where learner can be actually subject of as a person and not subject to, as a minor.


