

Reviews / Comptes rendus

The Art of Evaluation: A Resource for Educators and Trainers

by Tara J. Fenwick & Jim Parsons

(2nd ed.; Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 2009, 274 pages)

Learner measurement and evaluation have always been key skills for any educator. However, with the current political focus on accountability in education, to what degree an instructor, course, or institution meets their learning objectives is in the spotlight more than ever before. Happily, Tara Fenwick and Jim Parsons have released an updated second edition of their work *The Art of Evaluation*, to assist educators in navigating through the complexities of assessment.

The book is designed with experienced instructors of adult students in mind. Although many elements of evaluation remain constant regardless of the age of the learners, adult learners have numerous peculiarities, and Fenwick and Parsons offer several ideas and suggestions to help cater to the needs of this vulnerable group. The book focuses on learner evaluation but also details strategies to maximize the relationships between students and instructors to help turn assessments into real learning opportunities.

The opening chapters describe the fundamental principles of evaluation and how those principles apply to planning and implementing specific strategies. Instructors are invited to reflect on their own practices and philosophies to discover a comfortable relationship with the presented material. As such, the book is directed more at practising teachers; new educators might have difficulty relating to the potential incongruities in teaching and evaluation if they have not yet been involved in instructing and assessing learners.

The next section of the text provides general overviews of different approaches for evaluating non-traditional educational objectives, such as technical skill, performance, conceptual knowledge, and relational skill. This section does a particularly good job of raising complex issues in areas that do not relate well to traditional pencil-and-paper testing. For example, instructors of technical skills are advised to separate factual and procedural knowledge in evaluation. Such instructors are encouraged to consider the key points of the skill and help students deliver on those key points independently. Factual knowledge might also be deemed to be important, but long-term retention of facts may not reflect the ability of students to demonstrate their skill. By taking various purposes into consideration, instructors can better create an authentic opportunity for student learning. The numerous real-life examples make the concepts clear and are especially informative to those who may not teach in traditional contexts (e.g., job or safety training). Clear and simple suggestions are offered to help educators plan valid and effective assessments.

In the following section, the authors detail and encourage the use of ongoing, dynamic, and authentic assessments in the learning process. Readers are challenged to think of adult learners as partners who come to the classroom with their own purposes and goals. By using the learners' own knowledge of self, instructors can build meaningful opportunities for self-assessment, peer assessment, and formative feedback, all of which then feed the learning process and provide specifics for students to address next and thereby improve further. One shortcoming of this section is the lack of emphasis on setting, or helping students to set, clear learning objectives. Because adult students may find the shift to learner-centred education a difficult transition given past school and training experiences, articulating clear and concise learning objectives establishes a standard by which students can measure themselves and their progress. Without a clear standard to measure progress, students will have difficulty recognizing development and milestones. Experienced instructors often struggle with establishing clear objectives, so any practical advice in this vein is welcome.

The authors clearly wrestle with the necessity of assigning grades. Chapter 14 particularly challenges readers to think critically about common grading practices and implications, while acknowledging that instructors are required to participate in imperfect institutional systems. The authors provide practical solutions that are not overly taxing to instructors in terms of time or effort but still maintain the integrity of the ongoing, dynamic, and authentic evaluative systems previously discussed.

The main difference between the first and second editions of this book is the inclusion of Chapter 16, "Assessing Online Distance Learning." In this chapter, the authors suggest how earlier concepts can be incorporated into an online delivery program, discuss explicitly how to assess online courses, and provide extensive advice on how students will interpret feedback and how best to avoid miscommunications. They also encourage instructors to plan for the uniqueness of online delivery by exploring the uses of course community postings, both as instructional and assessment tools. Recognizing that other assessment strategies detailed for face-to-face classroom delivery may not apply to online delivery, they offer several practical solutions in their place.

The book concludes with an extensive "toolbox" section that demonstrates numerous evaluation strategies in detail. Each strategy is thoroughly explained and accompanied by a list of its advantages and disadvantages. Sample rubrics, guidelines, and checklists are also included to provide readers with ideas for creating their own tools for their individual needs.

The second edition of *The Art of Evaluation* is a thought-provoking book that will assist experienced educators or trainers in critiquing their evaluation processes. The suggested strategies are well articulated and can be easily incorporated into almost any teaching situation with relative ease. The text is written in a pleasing conversational tone that de-emphasizes the academic jargon usually associated with evaluation manuals. Easy-to-read definitions for key terms are found in margin notes, and examples are plentiful, giving readers the sense that they are not alone in the navigation of the complexities of assessment. *The Art of Evaluation* is both a good resource for new instructors or trainers and a good refresher for those more experienced in assessing.

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