

The Use of Kōans for Insight Evaluation Approach Training

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Background: Since publishing a trilogy of articles relating Eastern mysticism to evaluation, the authors have received many inquiries about training.

Purpose: The article explains one promising new method under development—adapting the Zen practice of kōans for evaluation training.

Setting: Not applicable.

Subjects: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable.

Findings: Not applicable.

Conclusions: The authors believe that kōans can be used as a poetic technology for recalibrating evaluation practitioners' attitudes and actions about evaluation.

Keywords: *Insight evaluation approach, Eastern mysticism, kōans, training, Zen, enlightenment*

The views expressed in this manuscript are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the International Labour Organization, the United Nations, or the Evaluation Capacity Development Group.

Over the past two years, we have published a trilogy of articles relating Eastern mysticism to evaluation. In the first article (Russon, 2008), we expounded an Eastern paradigm of evaluation. In the second (Russon & Russon, 2009), we proposed a new approach to evaluation that integrates Insight Meditation techniques.

In the third article (Russon & Russon, 2010), we explored how ancient Chinese philosophy might influence the way in which evaluators think about Theories of Change.

Since publishing the trilogy, we have received many inquiries about training. Our response has always been that Insight Evaluation is a unique approach and that

traditional, Western methods of training (e.g., Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2004) are often not appropriate.

One promising new method that we are developing is adapting the Zen practice of kōans for evaluation training. A kōan is a story, dialogue, question, or statement that is used to confound the habit of discursive thought and shock the mind into awareness (Wikipedia, 2010).

A famous kōan is: “Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?” (Oral tradition attributed to Hakuin Ekaku, 1686-1769).

Evaluation Kōan Practice

We are exploring the use kōans as a poetic technology for recalibrating evaluation practitioners’ attitudes and actions about evaluation. Kōans should only be used after one’s mind has entered some Samadhi (Marinello, 1995).

Samadhi is the condition of mind in which most of the ideas, thoughts, feelings and judgments have quieted. (This is difficult for many of us evaluators.) The mind has become more or less clear, calm, clean, naturally reflective, and free-flowing in the moment.

Kōans deliberately stir up the mind and if the mind is agitated, kōan practice will only make things worse (Marinello, 1995). Once a measure of Samadhi is attained, the practitioner calls the example or question embodied in the kōan to mind.

Kōans are tricky instruments because they deliberately tempt us to analyze and interpret as we evaluators would do with any other object of inquiry. However, it is only after we give up trying to evaluate the kōan that a deeper level of inquiry becomes possible (Marinello, 1995).

Zen Master Wumen advised his students to let the kōans on which they were working sit in their bellies until they began to feel as if they had swallowed a hot iron ball that could not be digested or expelled (Wikipedia, 2010).

Eventually, the kōan will do its work and the mind will open in gentle deep understanding. At that time, one is called upon to present a token of that understanding. Often words are inadequate; some poetic or creative gesture will suffice (Marinello, 1995). Kōans are a performative way of gauging insight (Jaksch, 2007).

Below, we present several sample kōans that have been adapted for evaluation training along with a possible response. (Jesus Christ gave a caution regarding such responses when he said “You have said it, but you have not understood.”)

Sample Kōans and Responses

The Nature of Change. Adapted from the kōan: *Not the wind; not the flag*

Two evaluators were discussing a project. One said: “The project results occurred because of the intervention.” The other said: “No, the project results occurred because of the natural cycles of change.” Another evaluator happened to be passing by. He told them: “Not the intervention, not natural cycles of change; it is you who are changing.”

Possible response: People see the world not as it is, but as they are. Al Lee

The Best Project. Adapted from the kōan: *Everything is Best*

An evaluator is speaking with a program officer. He asks, “What is the best project?” “All the projects in this program are the best,” replied the

program officer. “You cannot find here any project that is not the best.” At these words, the evaluator became enlightened.

Possible response: Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it.

The Unsuccessful Project. Adapted from the kōan: *The Short Staff*

An evaluator submitted her report and said, “If you call this project unsuccessful, you oppose its reality. If you do not call the project unsuccessful, you ignore the fact. Now, what do you wish to call it?”

Possible response: Be careful how you interpret the world: it is like that. Erich Heller

Inside or Outside. Adapted from the kōan: *Manjusri Enters the Gate*

One day as the evaluator stood outside the program he was to evaluate, the program director called to him, “Why do you not enter?” The evaluator replied, “I do not see myself as outside. Why enter?”

Possible response: It all depends on how we look at things, and not how they are in themselves. Carl Jung

The Defunded Project. Adapted from the kōan: *Nothing Exists*

An evaluator visiting with a program officer exclaimed, “There is no reality. It is all an illusion. There should be no judgment.” “If there is no judgment,” responded the program officer, “why did I defund the project?”

Possible response: The reverse side also has a reverse side. Japanese Proverb

Springtime in Kalamazoo. Adapted from the kōan: *Without Words, Without Silence*

An evaluation student asked his teacher: “Without speaking, without silence, how can an evaluation report express the truth?” The teacher observed:

“I always remember spring-time in Kalamazoo. The birds sing among innumerable kinds of fragrant flowers.”

Possible response: The only source of knowledge is experience. Albert Einstein

Who Evaluates?

Possible response: Who does not evaluate?

Reveal the True Nature of the Universe While Doing Evaluation.

Possible response: As [an evaluator] you take responsibility for holding the balance between light and dark within you and, by extension, the world around you, and ultimately when you go deep enough, the universe. Barefoot Doctor

Report the Findings of an Evaluation Without Words.

Possible response: The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you've gotten the fish you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit. Once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can talk with him? Chuang Tzu

Enlightenment

The purpose of using kōans for training is to help practitioners become enlightened evaluators. Enlightenment is a two phase process. The first phase is the experience of enlightenment. The second phase is an enduring change in the wake of the experience of enlightenment.

When an evaluator experiences enlightenment, a transcendental oneness is attained. The sense of separation between self and other falls away. In

operational terms this means that the evaluator seeks to remove the barriers within and between herself/himself and the object of inquiry.

In the wake of enlightenment, evaluators let go of their habitual ways of seeing the world in order to experience the object of inquiry in a new and vivid way. Enlightened evaluators often come to experience the simplest sights and sounds as extraordinary. The ordinariness of the object of inquiry comes to light in a completely new way.

Conclusion

Writing the conclusion of this manuscript was difficult. We came to realize that, in a sense, the conclusion had become for us a kōan to be resolved. After sitting with it for an extended period of time, we understood the wisdom of the words of Lous L'amore:

There will come a time when you believe everything is finished; that will be the beginning.

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