
Unbolting Evaluation: Putting it into the Workings and into the Research Agenda for Counselling

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In a provocative paper, Hiebert (1997 [this issue]) recommends that counsellors remove evaluation from where it is “bolted on to the side” of counselling, and integrate evaluation and accountability into the workings of the counselling process. In this response, I argue that what Hiebert is recommending is necessary, but it is also complex, and demands that the field of counselling commit itself to an ambitious agenda of research. I argue for data to support some of the assertions on which Hiebert’s case rests, and I make the case that the question of what is acceptable evidence is not one but three intertwined questions—an empirical question, a validity question, and a political question. Heeding Hiebert’s provocation means attending to the complexities of the research agenda that it implies.

IMPLICIT CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS: RESEARCH AGENDA ITEM #1

Hiebert claims that evaluation is “bolted on to the side” of counselling as an afterthought. He asserts that integrating evaluation into counselling is essential for the very survival of counselling into the next century. To support the latter alarmist assertion, Hiebert argues that counsellors and clients have implicit criteria for success that they use during counselling. He provides anecdotal unsubstantiated evidence of these implicit criteria. I am confident that most counsellors and clients would agree to the existence of these criteria, but I would argue that we need documentation of the nature and role of these criteria in counselling processes and outcomes. Hiebert’s argument continues that Conger, Hiebert, and Hong-Farrell (1993) found little systematic use of these implicit criteria to evaluate counsellors’ work with clients. Explication and clarification of the nature and role of these implicit criteria will be necessary before counsellors can use them systematically to evaluate and improve their practice. Models do exist, for example, researchers in the field of teacher education like Russell and Munby (1992) have systematically investigated the implicit criteria that teachers use to reflect on and improve their practice.

HIRED GUNS OR PARTNERS: RESEARCH AGENDA ITEM #2

Hiebert’s case regarding the “bolted on” nature of current evaluation in counselling, is advanced by his argument that the most common form of

evaluation is the external evaluator. He describes the outsider called in, most often after the fact, to serve a function distinct from service delivery. Again, this claim deserves the support of data, a second item for the research agenda. In the current era of partnerships, how widespread is this hired gun evaluation of counselling? I know that in autumn, 1995, I was invited to join a project planning and evaluation team for a school board in Ontario that was submitting a proposal to receive funding and carry out a curriculum implementation project on The Common Curriculum. I was asked to serve an advisory role and evaluate the design and success of the project. However, rather than my evaluation being bolted on, I was a partner on behalf of my faculty of education and university and an integral part of the workings. I assisted in the preparation of the proposal, attended many of the meetings of the project team, and was briefed by telephone about any meetings I could not attend. I do not know the extent to which the requirements for partners for most funded research and projects (e.g., Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council strategic grants; Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario curriculum implementation projects) has unbolted and transformed the external evaluator into a participating partner. This issue demands documentation and a place on the research agenda.

WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE EVIDENCE: RESEARCH AGENDA ITEM #3

Hiebert recommends that the question to ask in the planning stage is "How will I know this intervention is working?" I would encourage us all to ask this question at every stage, not just at the planning stage. He continues by focusing on the particular needs that have to be met to change the nature and focus of evaluation in counselling. Much attention is given to the question of what is acceptable evidence. I believe this is critical because it is, at the same time, an empirical question, a question of validity or trustworthiness, and a political question. On all three counts, it merits addition to the growing research agenda that falls out of Hiebert's provocative paper.

What is Acceptable Evidence: An Empirical Question

I would pursue these three questions independently, at least initially. Empirically, we need to know what counsellors and clients would find acceptable as evidence that their work together was worthwhile. Hiebert suggests that both process and outcome merit data collection. Are these two kinds of data equally important to the two players in the game? Do clients gradually come to realistic expectations for counselling outcomes as a function of counselling effectiveness? There are data relevant to these questions, as well as models for developing tools to answer these questions, in the works cited by Hiebert (e.g., Cummings, Hallberg, Martin, Slemon, & Hiebert, 1990; Hiebert & Noort, 1988).

What is Acceptable Evidence: A Question of Trustworthiness

The question of what serves as acceptable evidence to counsellors brings us quickly to issues of the validity or trustworthiness of such data. Hiebert uses the expression, informal assessment evidence, which seems to me a newly invented term to describe an existing phenomenon. I would prefer that the counselling community adopt the terminology and frameworks of one or more established qualitative approaches to evaluation that have already undergone considerable development (Patton, 1990).

Two of Hiebert's arguments in support of informal assessment evidence centre on the need to emphasize process as well as outcome and the importance of evaluating individual outcomes. Qualitative researchers have long understood the fit between process evaluation and qualitative approaches. "Qualitative inquiry is highly appropriate in studying process because depicting process requires detailed description; the experience of process typically varies for different people; process is fluid and dynamic; and participants' perceptions are a key process consideration" (Patton, 1990, p. 95). Consistent with Hiebert's current depiction of individual outcomes, Krumboltz proposed unique goals for each client 30 years ago (Krumboltz, 1966). Qualitative evaluators have frequently argued that "qualitative methods and design strategies can be particularly useful for evaluation of programs that emphasize individualized client outcomes" (Patton, 1990, p. 99).

In the evaluation, described earlier, that I conducted as a partner with an Ontario school board, I chose to use a qualitative approach described as "naturalistic and participant-oriented evaluation" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 532). This approach enables an evaluator to take advantage of the understanding she has gained by taking part in the ongoing project. I participated in working meetings, engaged in telephone conversations with members of the project team, received the revisions as the deliverables evolved, and received extensive written documentation based on working meetings, community input, and field testing. These experiences as a participant enabled me to provide a holistic evaluation followed by an assessment of some of the key components of this participant-development project that contributed to its overall success.

If we accept that the informal assessment evidence we seek is the product of a qualitative approach, then I think we must concern ourselves with standards of rigour used by qualitative researchers. Eisenhart and Howe (1992) advocated five general standards for trustworthiness in research. First, the data collection techniques must be suitable for answering the questions asked. Second, data collection and analysis techniques must be competently applied. This is particularly relevant to Hiebert's paper because it is "incumbent on educational researchers [in this case, counselling researchers and practitioners], who wish to demon-

strate that their techniques have been competently applied, to locate their work in the historical, disciplinary, or traditional contexts in which the methods used have been developed" (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992, p. 659). The third standard is alertness to prior knowledge in the field as well as the researcher's own prior knowledge or subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988). The fourth is the worth in importance or usefulness of the study and its risks. The fifth standard, which is applied to the first four and beyond, is comprehensiveness. It seems to me that the counselling community must adapt rigorous qualitative methods with the same vigour that was applied to issues of reliability and validity in the application of quantitative research methods to the evaluation of counselling outcomes in the past few decades (e.g. Fretz, 1981; Oliver, 1979).

What is Acceptable Evidence: A Political Question

The second large issue that Hiebert addresses, after unbolting evaluation, is the issue of accountability. He recommends consensus on what is evidence of success. Perhaps it is more realistic to seek understanding of what would constitute evidence of accountability for the various stakeholders, and then try to provide them with what they need (or want). Hiebert claims that the need for policies is integral to his argument. I think that what is integral is politics, rather than policies. Counselling endeavours are usually proposed, enacted, and funded through political processes and remain subject to political pressures. Competing audiences, usually called stakeholders, have vested interests. "Evaluation questions about the significance of program goals or about the quality and effectiveness of program strategies reflect not inquirer autonomy or theoretical predictions, but rather a political process of priority setting" (Greene, 1994, p. 531). Again, the political questions about what is acceptable evidence, of what, for whom are important questions for the field of counselling to study rather than to accept. Working from knowledge would seem to be necessary in answering this third question about what is acceptable evidence.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Hiebert has challenged counsellors to unbolt evaluation from the side of counselling and make it a priority in their day-to-day work. He argues for accountability. In this response I have laid out a research agenda implied in Hiebert's challenge, and suggested that questions of what constitutes acceptable evidence are complex. These questions are simultaneously characterized as empirical, concerned with validity, and fraught with politics. I believe counsellors must embrace and adapt rigorous methods from qualitative research approaches rather than re-invent these with the new name of informal assessment evidence. I commend Hiebert's challenge and, in turn, I challenge him.

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