

# American Journal of Evaluation

<http://aje.sagepub.com/>

---

## The Prose and Cons of Poetic Representation in Evaluation Reporting

Cheryl MacNeil

*American Journal of Evaluation* 2000 21: 359

DOI: 10.1177/109821400002100307

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://aje.sagepub.com/content/21/3/359>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



AMERICAN  
EVALUATION  
ASSOCIATION

American Evaluation Association

Additional services and information for *American Journal of Evaluation* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://aje.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://aje.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://aje.sagepub.com/content/21/3/359.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 1, 2000

[What is This?](#)

*This section includes shorter (e.g., 10–15 double-spaced manuscript pages or less) papers describing methods and techniques that can improve evaluation practice. Method notes may include reports of new evaluation tools, products, or services that are useful for practicing evaluators. Alternatively, they may describe new uses of existing tools. Also appropriate for this section are user-friendly guidelines for the proper use of conventional tools and methods, particularly for those that are commonly misused in practice.*

# The Prose and Cons of Poetic Representation in Evaluation Reporting

CHERYL MACNEIL

## ABSTRACT

The evaluation of modern day social programming presents challenges to the evaluation community. Among these are the need for others to understand the complexity of unique social circumstances and the inclusion of a diverse range of evaluation participants. Such challenges may call for alternative methods of representation in evaluation reporting. In this article I make a case for and demonstrate the use of poetic transcription as one form of presenting evaluation findings. Taking language from focus group interviews, I constructed a poem intended to provoke report readers to engage in a process of reflective meaning making about the program being evaluated. I discuss my rationale for using poetic transcription as a form of evaluation reporting, the method by which I constructed the representation, and the reactions of the different stakeholders involved in the evaluation.

## INTRODUCTION

Evaluators have acknowledged the importance of the language embedded in evaluation practice (House, 1986; Kaminsky, 2000; MacNeil, 1999), and the power of language in conveying meaning about the social complexities found in our evaluations (Hopson, 2000).

---

Cheryl MacNeil, CHERYL MacNEIL Consulting, Inc., 176 Fourth Street, Troy, NY 12180; Tel: (518) 270-0978; E-mail: [macred@capital.net](mailto:macred@capital.net).

---

*American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2000, pp. 359–367. All rights of reproduction in any form reserved. ISSN: 1098-2140

Copyright © 2001 by American Evaluation Association.

---

Illuminating the language in evaluations can serve an educative function. As a powerful catalyst for promoting learning during the conduct of evaluation, language use during evaluations can assist others to understand unique social phenomena and perspectives that arise in modern social programming.

Rallis and Rossman (2000) suggest that evaluators as 'critical friends' (p. 84) can take a critical stance with evaluation stakeholders to raise questions that challenge the status quo and promote dialogue. These authors make the argument that "the language of authority used by many evaluators and expressed directly in written reports can contribute to the defensiveness on the part of the potential users. . . shutting down their minds and deflecting the findings. . . " (p. 86). The inverse of this statement implies that attending to the critical language in evaluation reports can enhance the potential for evaluation use by creating circumstances that engage evaluation stakeholders in dialogue about what is being learned.

It seems to me a useful quest to take this knowledge another step and explore how one might use the critical language in evaluation conversations to communicate complex findings in evaluation reporting while consciously creating a learning dissonance for the readers of the evaluation report. In this article, I will discuss the use of poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997) as a way of analyzing evaluation data and constructing poetic representations for the reporting of evaluation findings. Poetic transcription is a process that "involves word reduction while illuminating the wholeness and interconnectedness of thoughts" (Glesne, 1999, p. 183). It is a form of analytic writing that combines the voices of the evaluation participants with an interpretative analysis conducted by the evaluator. The constructed evaluation findings embody a new collective third voice. The poetic transcription is a "re-presentation" (Glesne, 1997, p. 204) of the narrative evaluation data obtained during the inquiry.

After describing the methodology of poetic transcription, I will elaborate on my intentions for selecting poetry as a reporting technique. I will discuss the reactions I received from the client who commissioned the report and other evaluation participants who read the report. Implications for the field of evaluation will be offered.

## THE EVALUATION

The evaluation examined a government-funded self-help program that hired successful recipients of mental health services to provide peer support to people in psychiatric institutions. The program director requested a focus group evaluation that would elicit the different perspectives of those involved. A total of ten focus groups were conducted representing three different constituencies: (a) people who received the services, (b) the peer employees, and (c) other traditional mental health staff working alongside the peer employees. The purpose of the interview protocols was to solicit information regarding current understandings of self-help and empowerment, develop understandings of the impact of the peer initiative in the milieu of the current service system, and to provide formative information to enhance the future delivery of the peer services.

I served as the facilitator for all of the discussions and was assisted by a doctoral student as comoderator. The focus group discussions were held at clinics, institutions, and drop-in centers. The conversations lasted about an hour, were recorded with permission of participants, and were transcribed later for analyses.

As a means of quality monitoring, the comoderator and I engaged in peer debriefing

sessions (Spall, 1998) after each of the focus group discussions and periodically throughout the analyses and report writing phases. Evaluation participants received a copy of the draft report so that members could check (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Schwandt, 1997) the summaries and conclusions contained within. All participants received a final copy of the evaluation report.

### **Why a Poetic Transcription?**

I elected to use poetic transcription as a reporting format for one particular section of the evaluation findings. The poetry was included among a variety of more familiar reporting formats (including, narrative thematic representations, direct quotations, summary figures, and the like) in the overall report. I knew poetic transcription as a reporting technique would be quite foreign to most people reading the report, but I thought it important to introduce the technique both as a means of exposing others to potential alternatives in evaluation reporting, and as a way of promoting dialogue and shaping new understandings about the evaluand.

Many of the evaluation findings and issues could have been reported in the form of poetic transcriptions. I was particularly inspired by a focus group participant in one of the groups of peer employees when he described his experience as, "Living in a fishbowl." That was this employee's way of framing the experiential complexity of his position. He went on to offer a lengthy description of what that image meant to him. I was struck by the veracity in his prose and later, in reviewing the transcripts from the other employees, found similar rich metaphoric and poetic castings. I was prompted both by the implicit poetry embedded in these interviews and in the challenge of characterizing a finding that was unique to this particular group—what it was like to be employed as a "professional mental patient."

### **Analysis and Transformation of the Evaluation Findings**

The focus group discussions were first analyzed by using the HyperRESEARCH 2.0 (1999) qualitative data analysis software program. This program allows for the systematic development of coding schemes and thematic sorting of issues directly from the qualitative data contained in the transcripts. Throughout the analysis, I used an open-coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in identifying and constructing thematic areas for presentation. I organized the coded excerpts by using familiar focus group analysis techniques (Krueger, 1998), clustering narrative data based on similarities and differences, considering the extensiveness, intensity, and internal consistency of comments, and grouping and regrouping the coded discussant comments. I eventually established categories of more abstract concepts and examined the transcript excerpts contained within.

During the transformation process, I highlighted the descriptive, metaphoric, poetic, or emotive clusters (these are the words boldfaced in the examples to follow) embedded in the quotations, and then extrapolated and reassembled these clusters into a poetic narrative that conveyed the particular central theme for the evaluation finding. The analytic method required that, as an evaluator, I find a balance between the artistic license of representation and the accurate communication of the findings. As evaluators do, I had to make judgments during the construction of this representation. My phrase selection and ordering was intended to fashion the essence of the excerpts into a rhythm that would create an educative dissonance about the issue being addressed while maintaining the integrity of the findings.

The final poetic transcription was a 44-verse poem representing seven connected

Excerpts from the coded Focus Group Transcripts	Poetic Representation
“A peer adds a <b>different dimension to the equation</b> , because we might be starting to make new plans with a client” (December 1999, focus group a, employee 7).	Verse Title: A different dimension to the equation.
“How is the system going to change unless people get inside it and literally play like <b>little Ralph Naders</b> and say guess what, we have a question about this, we have a concern about that. We’re working with peers and unless we <b>poke at this metal jacket</b> , the metal jacket is never going to give. The clothes are never going to change, <b>the fabric of it is never going to change</b> . So <b>it’s difficult to work in the system</b> ” (January 2000, focus group c, employee 3).	little Ralph Naders working in the system poking at the metal jacket looking to change the fabric
“The goal is to help that person to do as much for themselves as they possibly can. That <b>sparks creativity</b> , that <b>sparks self esteem</b> , <b>falling down, making mistakes</b> , doing those things by yourselves, are, from what I’ve learned in the past year of the job, that’s the most important ingredient toward recovery” (December 1999, focus group a, employee 2).	sparking creativity falling down making mistakes building esteem
“And what you do is you have different cultures at different sites. It makes it difficult to blend in all the time. You have to <b>adjust yourself to the culture of the staff</b> , you have to <b>adjust yourself to the culture of the consumer</b> , and you have to <b>adjust yourself to your own needs</b> towards your own recovery, <b>to continue with your recovery</b> ” (December 1999, focus group b, employee 5).	adjust to the culture adjust to the consumer adjust your own recovery and continue with your recovery
“We went to our direct supervisor, and we talked to him about the problems that we were having individually in the clinics, right, when we ran into adversity, various different staff were set in their ways, <b>like a dinosaur, they didn’t want to change</b> . I think <b>some were afraid of it</b> —so we addressed that issue” (January 2000, focus group c, employee 5).	like a dinosaur not wanting change afraid of presenting change our power as people is question
“Our credibility as state workers and our effectiveness, <b>and our power as people was really questioned</b> , in other words, like who are you to come in and ask for mailing lists or work with people in supported housing?” (December 1999, focus group b, employee 9).	

Figure 1. A Poetic Transcription Reflecting ‘The Experience’.

themes about the employment experience. For the purposes of this article I demonstrate my method by using two of the thematic excerpts from the poetic transcription. In the first example (Fig. 1), I transformed excerpts from the focus group discussions that were coded and grouped into categories I abstractly framed as ‘The Experience’. The quotations represented some of the participant descriptions about what it was like to work in a system from which one once received services.

The groups of employees also frequently talked about how they struggled with their relational position to other system employees, the people they serve, and the general service

### Coded Transcripts of Statements Regarding Role Identity

"People will come up to me and go, 'are you working, are you a staff, are you a social worker?' And I go, **I'm a psychiatric survivor** and **I'm working full time**. And they're kind of like oh, like what's that, like how did you manage that, like **which side of the line are you on?**" (January 2000, focus group c, employee 8).

"I try to explain, **I give peer support groups**. I don't even like the word counseling because then I sound like a social worker" (January 2000, focus group c, employee 3)

"They're looking at me, and they say well she's **getting a paycheck** at the same time I'm getting a paycheck so she's staff" (December 1999, focus group b, employee 4).

"I have to **learn how to play politics** a little bit, and **keep my distance**, from forces in my environment" (December 1999, focus group b, employee 10).

"I feel like I'm doing things that somebody else should be doing I'm doing a **case management** functions or **covering for staff**" (December 1999, focus group a, employee 6).

"I think that this position is a contradiction in terms to begin with. It's like **mixing oil with water**" (December 1999, focus group b, employee 1).

"I can't speak out the way I want to. I have to watch out because I work for the state. **You walk that very fine line**, that's all" (December 1999, focus group a, employee 7).

"We have to problem-solve and do this **political dance**. I'm here to do a job, that's what I was hired to do. I have to **dance with the system**" (January 2000, focus group c, employee 8).

"**I've been asked to go to staff meetings. And at times I've felt that I don't want to go.** I don't see the point at being at a clinical staff meeting at all times unless there's a real clinical reason for me to be there" (December 1999, focus group b, employee 5).

"I've got too many other things I should be doing that could really make a difference at that moment right then and there. But then I think, when I leave that room, **there's not that voice**. There isn't anyone that's going to be in that room that's going to question and say, **well why doesn't anyone ask the client what they think, or have you tried this?**" (December 1999, focus group a, employee 1).

Figure 2. A Poetic Transcription of the Struggle with 'Role Identity'.

system. The transcript excerpts and corresponding poetic transcription in Figure 2 represent these extensive discussions surrounding issues of 'Role Identity.'

### Reactions

In the text entitled *Personalizing Evaluation*, Kushner (2000) writes about methodology as a personal construct and claims that, "You have to know *why* you want to do evaluation before you can know *how* to do it" (p. 81). Choosing the poetic transcription as a style of evaluation reporting, I positioned myself as critical evaluator, attempting to create new understandings and constructions among the readers of the report. In this piece of the evaluation report, I demonstrated concern with conceptual utility (Rossi & Freeman, 1985) for the reader. In creatively using the language in the evaluation, I aim to influence and advance the understandings of the reader in regard to a particular issue in this program.

---

**Poetic Representation of “Role Identity”**

Which side of the line am I on?

a psychiatric survivor  
a full-time worker  
running support groups  
getting a paycheck

learn to play politics  
case management  
covering for staff  
keeping my distance

mixing oil with water  
walking a fine line  
a political dance  
a dance with the system

I don't want to sit in staff meetings  
but where is the voice?  
why doesn't anyone ask?  
have you tried this?

---

*Figure 2.* (continued)

When I submitted the poetic transcription as a part of the larger report to the executive who commissioned the evaluation, her reaction was that she very much liked it and thought it enhanced the findings of the report. She thought the poetic transcription “would be useful in shaping understandings about the inherent challenges and contradictions of the position.” But she also wondered whether others she would be sharing the report with would understand or value the representation. We discussed several processes to solicit feedback about the report and poetry.

I was first invited to present my findings to the employees of the program at their annual retreat. Also present during that day were the supervisors of the employees, some of who participated in different phases of the evaluation. Before the retreat began, I asked some of the peer employees whether they would volunteer to read over the poetic piece with a critical eye to see if it held up for them (member checking was also an intentional part of the event), and whether they would consider reading it aloud at the end of the day. They were enthusiastic about the offer and snuck away with the piece during the afternoon for a private rehearsal.

During the course of the day I presented the overall findings from the evaluation. Later in the day, the employees read the forty-four verses of *Living in a Fishbowl* to an audience of their colleagues and their supervisors, each taking a turn at the change of verse, reading the last stanzas together in unison. It was quite a striking performance. The room was deadily quiet while the readers intently focused—smiling, grimacing, and accentuating at all the fitting moments. The audience members nodded in agreement verse after verse and delivered a resounding round of applause upon completion of the reading. When I asked the audience of evaluation participants ‘if and how’ they thought the poem was useful they commented about several aspects.



First, they thought the language and format of the poem put their work, thoughts, and experiences into an accessible medium. Madison (2000) has described how language use in evaluations can either be an obstruction or an ally for shaping understandings about complex social phenomenon. These evaluation participants talked a lot about how important the poem was in its ability to communicate in a language different than traditional evaluation reporting. One participant best summed it up in stating, "It makes people think differently about what we are doing because you have transformed very complicated issues into simple content that illuminate raw realities." Second, this group of evaluation stakeholders reported both conceptual shifting in their thinking and empowerment-oriented (Mertens, 1997) effects. According to these stakeholders, the poetic transcription "validated their roles," "made them view their jobs differently," "helped to unify them as a group," and "built on their courage to continue working in this challenging position."

As for other readers of the evaluation, there has been mixed reaction to the poetic transcription. Responses from other personnel reading the report have ranged from one extreme end of the continuum, with one reader commenting, "I don't think this belongs in the report," to the other, "All evaluations should include something like this," with a mix of reactions, understandings, and acceptance in between. What this says to me is that the poetic transcription has served some useful purposes.

On one level, the poetic transcription focused readers to pay attention to and discuss the evaluation findings. By promoting discussions among readers about processes and products of evaluative inquiry, the poetic transcription provoked reflective dialogue about evaluation practice. For the participant who was uncertain whether the poem belonged in the evaluation and others, we were able to have a conversation about "what is and is not an evaluation, and why this is perceived as so"—a dialogue that continues within this program community. The poem has served an instrumental function in engaging stakeholders in ongoing dialogues about higher ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. On another level, the content of the poetry made readers rethink what it meant to be an employee in this program and prompted conversations about complex interconnected issues and relationships. The poetry influenced the meanings and values held by the different stakeholders about the evaluand, and raised higher moral and political issues for reflection about a dimension of the program.

## **Future Considerations**

Cronbach (1980) has proposed that one criterion by which to judge an evaluator is by what others learn as a result of the evaluation. In this study, it was educative to introduce the poetic transcription among other more traditional forms of representation. The poetic transcription was instructive to many of the evaluation participants, both in what was to be learned about a part of the evaluand, and what was to be learned about evaluation. The representation shaped new understandings and created critical dialogue among stakeholders.

It has been a challenge to step outside of conventional methodology and representation while maintaining the perceived accuracy and utility of the reported findings. Not all evaluators will find it in their internal 'tool kits' to work with evaluation data in this manner. I am not recommending that all evaluations or evaluators include poetic transcription in their reporting. Based on this experience, I do acknowledge the potential benefits from thoughtful and methodical experimentation with alternative forms of representation in evaluation reporting. As the evaluation community continues to promote notions of inclusive evalua-



tions and expand the idea of 'who is a stakeholder,' so too should thought be given to how best to include these audiences via the accessibility of evaluation reporting. Modern social program evaluation calls for evaluators to explore the possibilities of communicating complex findings in accessible venues for diverse audiences.

All evaluations are representations, whether numerical, pictorial, or linguistic. As such, all evaluations will better serve, or be more palatable, to some audiences than to others. There is a long history of evaluators and evaluation participants having preferred methodologies defined through their value systems, and the larger social, political, and moral contexts (Madaus, Scriven, & Stufflebeam, 1983). Evaluators must know their audiences and negotiate the construction of their reports. Here I offer the poetic transcription as one form of representation in evaluation reporting that can be introduced to audiences who struggle with the accessibility of traditional reporting formats, and who are open to the possibilities of constructing new meaning through creative language constructions.

## REFERENCES

- Cronbach, L. J. (1980). *Toward reform of program evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming a qualitative researcher*. New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Glesne, C. (1997). That rare feeling: Re-presenting research through poetic transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 202-221.
- Hopson, R. K. (Ed.). (2000). *How and why language matters in evaluation. New Directions for Evaluation*, 86. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- House, E. R. (1986). How we think about evaluation. In E. R. House (Ed.), *New directions in educational evaluation* (pp. 30-48). Philadelphia, PA: The Falmer Press.
- HyperRESEARCH 2.0 [Computer Software] (1999). ResearchWare, Inc., California, USA: Scolari Publications Software.
- Kaminsky, A. (2000). Beyond the literal: Metaphors and why they matter. In R. K. Hopson (Ed.), *How and why language matters in evaluation. New Directions for Evaluation*, 86 (pp. 69-80). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Analyzing and reporting focus group results*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kushner, S. (2000). *Personalizing evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- MacNeil, C. (1999). The integrity of evaluation. Doctoral dissertation, University at Albany. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 60, AAG9940777.
- Madaus, G. F., Scriven, M. S., & Stufflebeam, D. L. (Eds.). (1983). *Evaluation models*. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Madison, A. (2000). Language in defining social problems and in evaluating social programs. In R. K. Hopson (Ed.), *How and why language matters in evaluation. New Directions for Evaluation*, 86 (pp. 17-28). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertens, D. M. (1997). *Challenges and advantages of using the emancipatory paradigm as a theoretical framework for evaluation*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association, San Diego, CA.
- Rallis, S. F., & Rossman, G. B. (2000). Dialogue for learning: Evaluator as critical friend. In R. K. Hopson (Ed.), *How and why language matters in evaluation. New Directions for Evaluation*, 86 (pp. 81-92). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rossi, P. H., & Freeman, H. E. (1985). *Evaluation: A systematic approach*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

- Schwandt, T. A. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Spall, S. (1998). Peer debriefing in qualitative research: Emerging operational models. *Qualitative inquiry*, 4, 280–292.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, C. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.