

Book Review – Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People

Author: Kim Sabo Flores

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For those of us who still feel a small knot in our stomach every time we hear the word “evaluation”, - take heart. Kim Sabo Flores’s new book, “Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People” gives more than a ray of hope. From the simple but profound observation that human beings “are all born evaluators” Sabo-Flores has created an accessible and even exciting account of how to understand and practice evaluation that is developmental to young people who participate.

Sabo-Flores’ work comes out of several traditions of great interest to community development scholars and practitioners. One is positive youth development, another is participatory evaluation. But she goes further. She deconstructs traditional evaluation methodology and the result is a re-construction that is concerned with transformation. For her, evaluation is not separate from the work of the youth programs to be evaluated. The goal of evaluation is to “create an environment where everyone can grow and develop.” To do this she synthesizes the work of Vygotsky, the Soviet educator and psychologist who posited a socio-cultural understanding of development, Newman and Holzman whose work examines the relationship between performance and development and Fetterman who was concerned with evaluation and empowerment. Out of these streams of thought she has created a methodology and practice of evaluation that is playful, creative and performatory.

The book begins with an overview of the field and then is designed as a step-by-step guide to how to do participatory youth evaluation. The beginning of each section has a “what you will learn” from the chapter. This device does not do justice to the richness of the dialogue that follows and I found myself skipping it. In the practical guide there is an ongoing parallel section in boxes that describes to the reader examples from Sabo-Flores practice with young people. The stories of her work are delightful and the reader gets a sensuous understanding of her creative methodology from these stories as well as an appreciation of the breadth of her work.

Her insights are often profound. She talks about the need to help young people “perform as evaluators”, she talks about the “art of question asking” and how important that is for young people to practice since they are most usually in the role of giving answers to adults who are asking the questions. She talks about the role of improvisation and of building with everything, including the good, the bad and the ugly. She gives examples of how she has used the ugly to create something new. She talks about evaluation as “not knowing”. And she makes a passionate plea for creativity, relationality and transformation as opposed to “knowing”.

At times philosophical, (she sometimes questions her own assumptions with the reader), at times passionate, especially about creating developmental environments with young people, the accessibility of her writing results in demystifying evaluation. She discusses, logic models, indicators, outcomes, facilitation - all the jargon and concepts of the field and she does it in a way that anyone new to evaluation would not be intimidated. She makes you believe that anyone can do a youth participatory evaluation. Just as

importantly, anyone with a bad attitude towards evaluation, - an attitude that regards it as an unfortunate evil that funders insist on, will finish this book with a new and hopeful outlook towards its possibilities.