

HOW DOES WHAT WE DON'T KNOW AFFECT WHAT WE DO? EMBRACING AND NAVIGATING OUR IGNORANCE



Christian Lucchesi, University of Wisconsin-Stout
Tiffany Smith, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

Evaluators in today's society are in a constant state of ignorance – and that's okay!

It's our job to uncover new and pressing knowledge and share it with important agents in the community.

We enter contexts, often without any understanding of the intricacies and complexities involved and have great authority in where we shine our light and what counts as knowledge within those contexts.

We utilize examples to explore how ignorance, operating in four distinct ways (Haas & Vogt, 2015), can influence our competency and everyday practices as evaluators.

This poster is an encouragement to reflect on ourselves and how we practice as evaluators, as well as our competency, as outlined in the American Evaluation Association Competencies (2018).

WHAT IS IGNORANCE?

Plainly speaking, ignorance refers to when an individual is lacking knowledge or understanding of some piece of information (Smith, 2019, p. 78).

The lens of ignorance should not be submissive, as in facing the neglect of certain practices or disappointment in our misunderstanding of context but should be embraced as an active quest for the right questions that lead to direction and curiosity.

"Like keeping your eye on the ball in tennis, or leaning your weight downhill in skiing, staying alert to ignorance is an unnatural skill that has to be learned. So too is the skill of responding to ignorance effectively"

Roy & Zeckhauser, 2015, p. 71

AEA 2018 COMPETENCY DOMAINS

-  **Professional Practice:** Expressing respect for the field and community evaluation interacts with.
-  **Methodology:** Focusing on technical aspects of evidence-based, systemic inquiry for valued purposes.
-  **Context:** Understanding the unique circumstance, multiple perspectives, and changing settings of evaluations and their users/stakeholders.
-  **Planning and Management:** Determining and monitoring work plans, timelines, resources, and other components needed for evaluations.
-  **Interpersonal:** The human relations and social interactions that ground evaluator effectiveness.

IGNORANCE TYPOLOGY (HAAS & VOGT, 2015) AND EXAMPLES FROM EVALUATION

	Complete Ignorance Being unaware that you do not know something	Not knowing the program you are evaluating has extra resources not accounted for (either in planning or in the logic model)	Performing a needs assessment in a community where the primary language is not English and not knowing
	Preferred Ignorance Being unaware and choosing to stay unaware	Hiring someone to complete the predictive statistics part of data analysis since you don't have those skills	Not knowing the make-up of participants in a housing program you are evaluating since it isn't part of the plan
	Presumed Knowledge When you think you are aware of something, but actually you are not aware	The research you did on the sample for your evaluation is not up to date, making your recommendations for methodology inaccurate	Presenting results using statistics assuming your client understands what they mean
	Investigative Ignorance When you know you are unaware and choosing to become aware	Realizing a methodology you do not practice is appropriate for your evaluation, so you seek out training and resources on how to provide that service	A distinct part of your sample is not signing up for the interview portion of your evaluation and you try to find out why

"If you know that you are not sure, you have a chance to improve the situation"

Richard P. Feynman (1998, p. 28)

 TWEET US! WHAT ARE YOUR REFLECTIONS?

#EmbracingIgnoranceAEA2020
@tiffany7001
@luccheesey

We want to read and engage with **your stories** and how you shine your light. Use our hashtag on twitter and tag us so we can see your reflections!

How do you see ignorance cropping up in your work?
How do you react to it?

Share a time when you truly recognized your ignorance and how it helped you grow as an evaluator.
Tell us what you thought of our poster!

"Although ambiguity and the unknown can be unsettling and at times downright scary, the alternative is certainty, which often results in stagnation, negativity, and arrogance"

Preskill, 2008, pp. 137-138

Awareness is the first step.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PRACTICE?

- Be present in your work
- Ask questions (don't force answers)
- Be adaptable, willing to pivot, and embrace ambiguity
- Connect with others
- Capitalize on others' expertise and knowledge
- Be explanatory in your communication
- Be receptive to feedback
- Intentionally reflect on practice (Smith, Barlow, Peters, & Skolits, 2015)
- Practice humility and tact
- Collaborate and co-create
- Appreciate local knowledge
- Be contextually responsive
- Be a good listener
- Hone your interpersonal skills