

Teaching it and Loving it! An interview with Christine Frank

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Tell me about your background and how you started in evaluation as a career?

After starting my career as an English teacher, I followed my avocation of dance into a new career in Dance/Recreation Therapy. While practicing as a therapist I worked on my Masters degree in therapeutic recreation at the University of Waterloo. I was first introduced to research design while in this program where I evaluated a play therapy intervention. In 1985 I began teaching at Georgian College in women's back-to-work programs.

After teaching for a few years I realized I needed a more complete theoretical underpinning, especially in educational theory. I began working on a doctorate in education at OISE. During my studies I developed a growing interest in research – especially qualitative research. What really grabbed me were the methods courses – I soon realized research had more to offer than I knew.

Immediately after completing my doctorate in 2000, I began teaching in Georgian College's post-graduate Research Analyst program – and I continue to do this today. The program is highly experiential for students and many of the projects I oversee in the community are evaluations. And then, some projects come to me as independent work where I offer services outside of my role as educator. So you see, I didn't really plan to be an evaluator but happily discovered it later in my career.

How do you balance your roles as educator and consultant?

Being a consultant and an educator are dual complements of one another. The tools I use are also complementary. As a professor you need to be current and informed in the practice you are teaching. As a researcher in college you are not paid to conduct research in the same way you are in university, so to be up on it I do outside work to keep me abreast of the field. I find each role feeds the other nicely.

I typically work with social service organizations. One example of work I did in my private practice was analysis of qualitative data collected in a poverty assessment conducted in six Caribbean countries. It was fascinating to learn the people's perception of poverty in areas that had been designated poor. Many said, "We are not poor!"

As an educator, I involve students in all aspects of the projects. For example, in one classroom project called “Making Ends Meet”— a study of poverty in the Barrie region— students carried out observations and interviews. Students gained practical research experience while the local social agencies and people in need benefited too.

What do you find most rewarding in your work?

It is rewarding to see that students really develop a deep understanding when they conduct evaluations experientially. I get a huge charge out of knowing that students are learning and they are inspired. I also like that the work I do has real benefit to the community. For example, the results of the “Making Ends Meet” project will be used for cooperative planning in Simcoe County. To be a part of all this is wonderful for students entering the field.

How long have you been a member of the Canadian Evaluation Society?

I’ve been part of CES for two years. I first began on the professional development committee and recently became a member of the Board of Directors. Right now I am involved in organizing the 2005 joint Canadian/US conference and thoroughly enjoying it. I am working with so many fascinating people with diverse backgrounds. It really is a tremendous opportunity to meet other professionals.

What are the most important skills needed to be a successful evaluator?

I think one needs a broad knowledge of how the world works. As with any profession I think the ability to make good judgement is also key to successful evaluations. We try to develop good judgement and critical thinking in our students. It’s important to understand the danger of unexpected program outcomes and to be cautious of how the results of an evaluation will affect those involved.

How have you seen the field evolve and where would you like to see it go?

I really like the movement toward participatory and emancipatory research, especially in international development work. I also like the direction we are moving with respect to integrating evaluation in day-to-day agencies. I would like to see evaluation be a comfortable part of people’s jobs, not a threat but an aid to making decisions based on evidence. We are definitely going in the right direction but it will take time to get there.

How can CES support you and others like you in your career?

CES National is doing a great job supporting us with the website – Benoit is constantly keeping us up-to-date. The regular news bulletins and excellent organizational management is

contributing to building a community. I've had a great time working with people on the committee and board and encourage others to get involved in CES too. You get to meet such interesting people that you would never have met otherwise.

What advice can you give students who are thinking about program evaluation as a career?

I would really encourage them to investigate different opportunities that exist. When I was young, I had no idea that such a variety of interesting and important work was out there. If you just get involved you might find yourself...in Africa...or anywhere in the world!

Just open up your eyes as it will provide you with so much opportunity.