

## Judgment, flourishing, and the composting of evaluation through Reflective Dialogue

**Tiffany L. S. Tovey\***, University of North Carolina Greensboro, US

**Aileen M. Reid**, University of North Carolina Greensboro, US

**Ayesha S. Boyce**, Arizona State University, US

**Stacy Huff**, University of North Carolina Greensboro, US

**Onyinyechukwu O. Onwuka du Bruyn**, University of North Carolina Greensboro, US

To cite this article:

Tovey, T.L.S, Reid, A.M, Boyce, A. S, Huff, S, Onwuka du Bruyn, O.O 2025 ‘Judgement, flourishing, and the composting of evaluation through Reflective Dialogue.’ In Lumb, M, Gordon, R.B, McKenzie, M & Ballangarry, J (Eds.) *Evaluation for Equity and Justice*, an issue of *Access: Critical Explorations of Equity in Higher Education*, vol. 13 issue 1, pp. 65–76.

\*TLSMI32@uncg.edu

---

In an era of ecological collapse, deliberate assaults on knowledge, and deepening inequities, the field of evaluation is still shaped by dominance logics, including positivist, colonial, technocratic, and patriarchal ways of seeing. These harmful frames are present, persistent as toxins in the soil. They distort what counts as knowledge, whose voice is heard, and what forms of flourishing are possible. We call for composting these logics through Reflective Dialogue (RD), a living, relational stance that re-grounds evaluation as an interpretive act of judgment accountable to equity and justice. Drawing on justice-oriented lineages, Indigenous and feminist epistemologies, and traditions of practical wisdom, we position RD as the living soil that sustains evaluative practice.

Through critique, metaphor, and practice-based vignettes, we show how RD interrupts the illusion of neutrality, redistributes epistemic power, and turns denial into nourishment for new possibilities. We contrast old ways of evaluation that collapse judgment into siloed, tidy narratives with new ways that co-create meaning, break the frame, and hold space for discomfort, uncertainty, and transformation. We include an appendix that translates RD into concrete evaluator actions, observable shifts in behavior, and survival strategies for working inside harmful systems and enacting an RD-orientation.

**Keywords:** reflective dialogue; practical wisdom; equity; judgment; relational practice

*You are standing, eyes closed, in the garden of evaluation approaches (Montrosse-Moorhead et al. 2024). Around you are what you've envisioned as vibrant flowers from every tradition, a variety that includes utilization-focused, developmental, participatory, culturally responsive, Indigenous, and systems-oriented. Each represents a way evaluators have tried to help things grow.*

*You open your eyes, and something's wrong. The blooms are thin. The leaves curl. The roots hesitate. By the official charts, the soil is perfect, the indicators are all green. Yet your body tells you otherwise. This is the ache of living in a world that does not match the one you are told exists.*

*Look closer. The problem isn't confined to one bed or one plant. It runs through the entire garden. This is "positivism," and "post-positivism" is only its rebranded strain. It defines "health" in its own narrow image, dismisses other ways of knowing what thrives, and actively shapes what can grow at all. Every approach here, no matter how different the foliage, is touched by it.*

*In the positivist-poisoned garden, tending projects follows prescriptions with fixed indicators, predetermined growth charts, and standardized soil "improvement" plans. Evaluation is reduced to compliance checklists, quarterly metrics, and logic models that cannot be bent without "scope creep." The gardener's job is to measure and report, aligning every plant's progress with an external blueprint, even when the plants themselves strain against it. Community members become "stakeholder inputs," their stories flattened into bullet points. Learning is treated as a deliverable, not a relationship.*

*You close your eyes again. But this time, not to shut out the trouble. You imagine what the garden could be if the soil were free of its constraints. In this vision, there are no growth charts taped to the gate, no invisible hands measuring every leaf against an imported standard. Gardeners move slowly, pausing to notice, to ask, to tend. Conversations ripple between beds. We learn what the squash has been telling the marigolds, how the rainwater has shifted the flavor of the kale. People come not to extract a harvest and leave, but to share food, stories, and tools for tending. Health is defined together, in the moment, with those who live and eat here.*

*In this garden, knowledge is not bagged and labeled for shipment. It's exchanged like seeds carried in pockets, traded between friends, and planted in unexpected places. It adapts, cross-pollinates, and thrives in the gaps where "official records" have pretended not to look. Decisions are made with the people who feel their impact in their hands... their tables... their seasons. The work of the garden is not to meet a target, but to sustain life for the long term.*

*When you open your eyes, you can still feel it. The hum of connection, the looseness of the soil underfoot, the quiet confidence that if one plant struggles, another will reach out its roots to share. This is the garden you want to work in. In fact, it is still there.*

*Beneath the surface, ephemeral, and hard to observe, another life is working. It is a mycelial network, the vast web of fungal threads through which forests share water, nutrients, and information. Through these hidden pathways, the forest stays attuned to change, redistributes what is needed, and responds before anything is visible aboveground. It's the shared infrastructure that makes growth and survival possible. This is Reflective Dialogue (RD). It is not a theory parked on a shelf, but the living network that links roots, senses trouble, shares nutrients, and begins the slow work of transformation. It's what allows the whole garden, across every approach, to remember how to flourish beyond the limits imposed from above.*

*This is not another paradigm shift, swapping one dominant form of knowing for another. Such a move still spreads the same toxins, maintained through systems that reward control, suppress dissent, and mask harm as rigor, while actively neglecting the soil beneath. What we need is a generative ecology, where knowledge itself is treated as alive, breathing, and interdependent with us. The garden does not need a new ruler. It needs us to tend the soil together, to strengthen the mycelial connections, and to choose practices that allow everything here to thrive, including ourselves.*

## **Introduction**

This paper introduces Reflective Dialogue (RD) as a living, relational practice that can restore the conditions for evaluation to flourish in service of equity and justice. It is written for evaluators, scholars, and practitioners who feel the dissonance between dominant evaluation norms, theoretical and academic platitudes, and the realities they encounter in their work. We argue that RD is not simply another method to add to the garden, but the connective mycelial network that nourishes all approaches, enabling evaluators to act with practical wisdom (Tovey & Archibald 2023), share power, and generate knowledge that is alive, responsive, and grounded in relationship. We use the term “mycelium” here not as a mere metaphor, but as shorthand for the hidden, connective work that makes dialogue, and life, possible. Drawing on both theory and practice, we map RD’s enabling conditions, distinguish it from deeply engrained positivist and post-positivist habits of evaluation, and offer concrete ways evaluators can cultivate it in their own work.

It is no revelation to say that all knowledge is mediated, whether in mathematics, where meaning emerges through shared proofs and symbols, or in perception itself, shaped by language, culture, and relation. Nor is it new to recognize that we are not separate from the world we study, but part of it. These truths have been named across centuries of philosophy, Indigenous scholarship, and in the contemporary sciences and mathematics that reveal relation as fundamental (e.g. quantum physics, category theory, systems theory, ecology, social neuroscience, and complexity), yet they remain persistently ignored or suppressed by systems that insist on separating knower from known, method from meaning, and research from life. That suppression is not accidental; it protects structures of control and the illusion of neutrality.

If reading this stirs discomfort, skepticism, or the impulse to move quickly past it, we invite you to pause and stay with us. The unease is part of the terrain we will travel together to see what becomes possible when we don't turn away from it.

To practice evaluation and research through the RD lens is not to innovate, but to remember, recover ways of knowing that have been made to seem impossible, and reassert them as the ground for credible, ethical, and human knowledge-making.

This paper has three purposes:

- To surface the epistemological constraints that limit what evaluation can see, know, and do when it remains rooted in positivist and post-positivist structures and ways of thinking.
- To articulate RD's enabling conditions and core gestures as a practice that resists these constraints.
- To offer concrete ways evaluators can cultivate RD within diverse evaluation approaches.

To support these aims, we begin by situating RD within the philosophical and practical landscape of evaluation, then contrast it with dominant paradigms, illustrate its practice through metaphor and lived examples, and conclude with an appendix of concrete tools and strategies for cultivating RD, even within systems that resist it.

### **Regrounding Evaluation: Judgment, Resistance, and the Soil of Reflective Dialogue**

Evaluation is at a threshold where the roots we choose to feed will decide what can survive. Authoritarianism rises, ecosystems collapse, epistemic trust erodes, and inequities deepen across race, gender, and class. In this moment, our familiar metaphors like tidy trees with ordered branches and theories neatly labeled by author (Alkin & Christie 2023) no longer suffice. Trees remind us of growth and connection, yet their visible order can draw attention away from the soil that makes that growth possible. That soil is the living ground where relation and renewal begin.

The garden, as Montrosse-Moorhead et al. (2024) provide for us, offers us a more plural image. It replaces linear histories with a cultivated space where diverse approaches can coexist. This shift matters as it signals openness to many ways of working and resists the hierarchy implied by the tree. Yet without tending to the soil, even the most diverse garden risks languishing. Diversity in appearance can still mask depletion underneath, where colonial, positivist, and technocratic logics limit what counts as knowledge and whose flourishing matters.

We name RD as the underground network that keeps the garden alive. It is the mycelial infrastructure that allows each approach to draw strength from others, share resources, and adapt together. RD is not another flower to plant but the condition that lets any flower thrive. It is evaluative judgment practiced as *phronesis*—practical wisdom oriented toward *eudaimonia*, the flourishing of life. Where positivist and post-positivist habits treat knowledge as a static product to be extracted, RD treats it as a living, relational practice, rooted in the soil we tend together.

## Judgment and the Theory Problem: Composting Paradigms, Myths, and Denial

At its heart, evaluation is an act of judgment. Not judgment as the mechanical application of criteria or the performance of procedural neutrality, but judgment as the capacity to discern, deliberate, and decide well in context. Aristotle called this *phronesis*, the virtue of determining what is good and just in the particulars of a situation. Later, philosophers (e.g. Wittgenstein 1958) reminded us that even rules depend on shared life and meaning, and no set of instructions can dictate their own correct use. Building on this lineage, Schwandt and Gates (2021) argue that evaluation's identity cannot be secured through paradigmatic closure but only through its practice as judgment in action.

Evaluation has long wrestled with what Shadish, Cook, and Leviton (1991) called the “theory problem,” or the worry that without a unifying paradigm, the field remains fragmented or immature. Borrowing from Kuhn (1962), they described evaluation as a pre-paradigmatic science still awaiting coherence. But many, including House (1993), have argued that evaluation's pluralism reflects its social and moral complexity rather than its underdevelopment. To demand paradigmatic closure, House warned, is to mistake the field's vitality for disorder.

The label of “pre-paradigmatic” has never been neutral. As Scriven (1967) argued, evaluation was never simply the collection of data. It is, and has always been, about the rendering of judgments of value. Schwandt (2002) reinforces that these judgments are interpretive and dialogic, and Dahler-Larsen (2012) warns that the frameworks we design actively shape the realities they claim to measure. Neutrality is an illusion.

This reframing has consequences. It shifts legitimacy from technical control to practical responsibility and the work of cultivating flourishing amid uncertainty and systemic harm. It also clarifies why RD is not a supplemental method but the living condition of evaluative knowing. It is the soil in which judgment without final rules can take root and sustain itself. Reflective Dialogue resists the pull of rule-bound certainty, keeping evaluators accountable to the complexity of the worlds they engage.

Still, old habits take root. We hear that rigor means control, that neutrality secures legitimacy, that coherence must be achieved through uniformity. Yet what these habits reproduce is not clarity but compliance. The field's anxiety about credibility often turns evaluation into the performance of order—collecting data long after meaning has thinned, valuing precision over interpretation, and mistaking accumulation for care. These are residues of positivism still alive in our soil, what Hirschman (1991) might call the futility thesis. It is the belief that progress cannot count until it conforms to someone else's standard of proof. The cost is not methodological alone; it is moral. It drains vitality from judgment, reducing evidence to what can be measured instead of what must be answered to.

This futility breeds anxiety about legitimacy (Picciotto 2016). Socialized to equate neutrality with credibility (Harro 2000), evaluators often feel trapped between complicity and irrelevance (Boyce et al. 2023; Huff 2025; Reid et al. 2020). The resulting insecurity is not incidental; it is cultivated by the residues of Cartesian and positivist thought that still pervade our evaluative soil.

Scriven's (2013) description of evaluation as an "alpha" discipline captures both the aspiration and the risk of this inheritance. While it recognizes the centrality of reflective judgment, it can also invite hubris, imagining evaluation as standing above the very soils of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy that sustain it. Evaluation does not rise above these conditions; it breathes within them. To claim otherwise is to deny the moral and historical entanglements in which all knowing lives.

Having traced these philosophical residues in our soil, we now turn to the rhetorical strategies that keep them in place, and how our language, habits, and defenses continue to protect the very myths we claim to outgrow.

### **Naming the Rhetoric of Reaction**

The soil of evaluation is not only heavy with residues; it is also patrolled. As evaluators begin to compost the myths of paradigmatic immaturity and the fears they breed, they encounter the weight of resistance from the systems in which they work. The residues of Descartes and Kuhn are not abstract, they are enforced daily through funding structures, institutional review, procurement processes, and professional norms.

Hirschman (1991) reminds us that resistance is rarely blunt obstruction; it works through patterned arguments designed to keep change at bay. His analysis identifies three recurrent rhetorical theses that appear whenever entrenched systems are challenged. In evaluation, each of these moves is easy to recognize once named:

- The perversity thesis — Calls for justice-oriented evaluation are framed as dangerous. Attending to culture, equity, or power will bias results, erode rigor, or harm the very communities we hope to serve.
- The futility thesis — Even when evaluators compost old residues, we are told it will not matter. Politics, funding cycles, or institutional inertia will nullify the effort, so better to stick with the neutral technical report.
- The jeopardy thesis — Efforts to decolonize or democratize evaluation are cast as threats to the hard-won legitimacy of the practice, risking its credibility and institutional foothold.

These rhetorical moves do more than block change, they feed evaluator anxiety, reinforcing the fear that to step outside neutrality is to risk irrelevance or professional ruin. However, for many evaluators, this very adherence to neutrality causes cognitive dissonance as they struggle with feelings of guilt at the extractive nature of their work (Huff 2025). Together, they keep evaluators in the house of mirrors, parading the emperor's wardrobe, insisting that denial is the price of belonging.

Reflective Dialogue does not make these resistances disappear. It names them, composts them, and turns their energy toward growth. By bringing the rhetoric into the open, evaluators can see perversity, futility, and jeopardy not as verdicts on their work but as residues of a system in denial. Once named, they become compost, material that can be broken down and transformed into nourishment for a more just evaluative practice.

Just as some chemicals never truly leave the soil, the residues of positivism persist—mobile, invisible, and resistant to breaking down. They seep into the roots of evaluative practice, carried through training, professional norms, and institutional expectations. Even when an evaluator chooses different seeds, like justice-oriented approaches, participatory designs, culturally responsive methods, those residues can still shape what takes root and how it grows. They do not vanish simply because we've named them; they require ongoing tending and vigilance.

Without active work to identify and address the rhetoric, it re-enters the cycle, subtly reasserting the very myths, anxieties, and constraints we thought we had composted. Having surfaced how resistance and reactivity are reproduced, we can now ask what nourishes change. Turning the soil means tracing the justice-oriented lineages that have long composted these residues in practice.

### **Turning the Soil: A Justice-Oriented Lineage**

If Hirschman shows us the rhetoric that resists change, the question remains: How do evaluators ground their identity and legitimacy in such contested soil? Linnell and Montrosse-Moorhead (2023) argue that evaluation still lacks a coherent professional identity. Many evaluators operate under other titles like researcher, consultant, or analyst, and the field continues to wrestle with whether it is a profession at all. Without clarity, evaluators risk being reduced to technicians who are tasked with producing numbers while being excluded from shaping what counts as value. Additionally, some evaluators choose the type of evaluation work they do based on shared identity with the populations they serve, creating a closer relationship with that population (Boyce et al. 2023; Huff 2025).

This crisis of identity is not simply academic. Picciotto (2016, 2022) has described the field's persistent evaluator anxiety as the fear of being dismissed as biased, losing credibility, or being sidelined by funders and institutions. That fear is fed by the same residues and enforcement mechanisms named above, such as the idea that legitimacy comes only through neutrality, technical control, and adherence to systems that pre-define value.

Yet evaluators have long resisted these conditions, turning the soil through justice-oriented practice. A deep lineage of evaluation scholarship challenges the dominance of positivist, technocratic, and colonial residues in the field. Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE), for example, foregrounds the importance of context, culture, and community-defined values in shaping both the process and purpose of evaluation. Scholars like Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart (2015) and Tovey and Onwuka du Bruyn (2025) have shown that evaluators must engage reflexively with their positionality and the power dynamics embedded in their work. Kirkhart's (2005, 2010) work on multicultural validity insists that validity is cultural and ethical, demanding attention to whose knowledge is legitimized and whose is excluded.

Hazel Symonette (2004) fervently advocates for evaluators to leverage the self as responsive instrument and the importance the evaluator's "inside-out" work (self-awareness) and "outside-in" work (expand diverse skills, knowledge and professional toolkit) to be responsive to culture and context. Jennifer Greene (2006) has advanced democratic and participatory approaches that center dialogue, inclusion, and shared meaning-making, inviting evaluators to move beyond instrumental uses of data toward processes that cultivate deliberation, mutual understanding, and collective insight. Mertens' (2009) transformative paradigm positions evaluation as a tool for advancing

human rights and social justice, arguing that evaluators must not only document inequities but work to dismantle them through inclusive, dialogic, and action-oriented approaches.

Indigenous scholars such as Chilisa (2012, 2020), Cram (2016), Waapalaneexkweew (Bowman) and Dodge-Francis (2018), and Wehipeihana (2019) advance methodologies grounded in Indigenous and African ways of knowing that foreground sovereignty, relational accountability, and collective healing while exposing the colonial foundations of Western research paradigms. Their work embodies knowledge as lived, relational, and accountable, which deeply resonates with RD's commitment to redistribute epistemic power and center historically marginalized voices. In practice, this means inquiry that is carried out in relation, through deliberative processes that honor intergenerational impact, attend to spiritual and communal balance, and uphold protocols of respect and reciprocity (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010). Such work shows RD's kinship with Indigenous approaches that treat judgment as an ethical and relational act rather than a detached procedure.

The AES Evaluators' Professional Learning Competency Framework affirms this shift, emphasizing humility, reflexivity, and ethical judgment as core to what evaluators must be able to do. This is not simply a matter of skills but of stance. Reflective Dialogue offers the soil from which evaluators draw legitimacy, not as detached technicians, but as judgment-makers who accept the responsibility of cultivating flourishing in the face of systemic denial.

### **Reflective Dialogue: Naming the Practice**

Reflective Dialogue is the sustained, relational practice of evaluative judgment without final rules, rooted in mutual engagement, reflexivity, and a shared commitment to cultivating flourishing in context. It is not a discrete method or step in a process, but the living infrastructure of evaluation, the mycelial network that connects people, knowledge, and action across differences. Through RD, evaluators surface and negotiate values, interrogate assumptions, and co-create meaning with those most affected by decisions. Such work depends on conditions of trust, relational safety, and a willingness to be changed through dialogue. These capacities distinguish RD from extractive or compliance-driven practice, grounding judgment in shared responsibility and care.

Naming RD acknowledges and legitimizes a form of knowing that many evaluators have long practiced quietly, despite systems that denied its value. Naming does more than label a practice; it reframes the ontology of evaluation itself, revealing that how we talk about our work already determines what we believe knowledge is, who holds it, and how it should move. Naming RD composes the denial around this relational ground, helping evaluators recognize and cultivate with intention what has always moved beneath the surface, like mycelium holding relationships, breaking down residues of fear and neutrality, and creating the conditions where new, just possibilities can take root. Reflective Dialogue is not an addition to evaluation; it is the practice through which evaluation actually happens.

Evidence is where that unseen work first meets the light. Because language carries ontology, how we name evidence shapes what we believe it is for. In *dominance* logics (e.g., positivism, patriarchy, white supremacy), evidence is mobilized to justify, defend conclusions, protect

authority, and keep existing arrangements intact. In RD, evidence illuminates. It is the moment when reality meets us back and asks for a response.

Where the scientific method once sought certainty through control — observation, interpretation, verification — RD reclaims the cycle through relation. Evidence, judgment, position, and relation mirror those stages, but composted. Encounter replaces observation, because we meet what appears rather than stand apart from it. Discernment replaces verification, because knowing is a matter of sensemaking, not proof. Reflexivity replaces neutrality, because our positions and histories move with us. Reciprocity replaces conclusion, because we remain in accountable relation to what we have learned.

This is how knowing breathes again within the living soil of evaluation, each movement feeding the next in a regenerative cycle of seeing, sensing, and staying accountable to what appears. RD is a way of being in evaluation that turns denial into soil for flourishing by insisting that knowing is always relational, contextual, and ethical. It is a dynamic, relational process of making meaning together. It calls us to notice what is happening within, while being in honest, attuned conversation with others and the world. It is not simply reflection plus dialogue, but a way of showing up. A posture of presence, inquiry, and transformation together.

Four anchors ground this stance:

1. **Responsiveness, not agenda.** Reflective Dialogue resists the illusion of control. It moves at the speed of trust, not the clock, composting the fantasy of neat order and mechanical rationality.
2. **Co-construction, not extraction.** Dialogue is a shared responsibility. Knowledge in RD is not mined from participants as data, but co-created through mutual meaning-making. This breaks down the evaluator-as-expert monopoly, redistributing epistemic power across difference (Cousins & Whitmore 1998; Chouinard & Milley 2018).
3. **Mutual vulnerability, not performative openness.** It asks us to welcome discomfort as a teacher, composting the futility of neutrality and legitimizing embodied risk as a condition of knowing.
4. **Epistemic humility, not control.** Reflective Dialogue embodies humility and curiosity, letting go of needing to know or be right, and slowing the rush to judgment so collective sensemaking can emerge. It creates space for collective sensemaking and the emergence of more inclusive understandings of what matters and why (Mertens 2009; LaFrance & Nichols 2008; Cram 2018).

Reflective Dialogue does not automatically take shape as a practice. The relational ground is always present, as people are already entangled with one another and with the worlds they inhabit, but this entanglement does not become RD simply because a group gathers or someone invokes the word “reflection.” For RD to take form, that ground must be tended with care. Certain conditions help it emerge and hold. These conditions do not create RD; they allow what is already moving beneath the surface to become visible, steady, and generative. In this mycelial ecology, RD decomposes denial, fear, and anxiety into nourishment, weaving networks of trust and care that sustain growth.

Naming RD and its enabling conditions is not about codifying a new paradigm but about re-tending the philosophical ground of evaluation itself. It brings into view the relational, contextual, and ethical commitments that have always animated justice-oriented lineages, offering soil in which those commitments can finally flourish in practice.

### Conditions for Reflective Dialogue

Reflective Dialogue depends on the quiet work of decomposing what no longer serves, weaving connections, and redistributing insight so new life can take hold. This means designing evaluative spaces that make time for reflection, invite shared meaning-making, and honor interdependence.

Reflective Dialogue thrives when its ecology holds evaluators in humility, accountability, and care. The following six enabling conditions describe that ecology and what it looks like in practice.

1. **Spaciousness.** Mycelial life grows in the quiet spaces between roots and stones. Reflective Dialogue needs this same room to wander, revisit, and slow down. Spaciousness resists the cultural pressure toward acceleration and closure that too often governs evaluation timelines.

In practice, this means building pauses into the process where folks can step back, notice what is emerging, and let meaning ripen before deciding what it means. Creating such temporal and cognitive space is an epistemological act that allows wisdom to unfold instead of being forced into pre-determined forms. When evaluators honor this rhythm, reflection becomes part of the work itself rather than something appended after deliverables are complete.

2. **Safety and shared risk.** Healthy ecosystems thrive on balance between shelter and exposure. RD depends on the same dynamic. Safety is not insulation from discomfort but the mutual trust that difficult truths can surface without punishment. Like roots intertwining underground, participants anchor one another through this vulnerability.

In practice, this means designing spaces where people can speak from unfinished places and hold tension without rushing to resolution. It is being with others in uncertainty rather than managing them toward closure.

3. **Diffusion of expertise.** In a living ecosystem, knowledge circulates rather than accumulates. No single organism controls the flow of nutrients; strength arises through exchange. Reflective Dialogue diffuses expertise through relationship, recognizing lived experience, cultural knowledge, and professional skill as interdependent sources of insight. Authority becomes porous, shaped by mutual recognition rather than possession.

In practice, this means designing evaluations where interpretation is co-created, not delegated; where community insight is treated as analytic intelligence, not “input”; and where uncertainty is named as part of rigor. Expertise, in this ecology, is less a credential than a connective tissue and an ongoing unlearning of control and re-

learning of trust. How we speak is part of that ecology, and plain, relational language lets meaning travel through the network, keeping knowledge alive and reachable rather than sealed inside professional code.

4. **Attunement.** Mycelial threads respond to the subtlest shifts in their environment in moisture, warmth, and light. Reflective Dialogue depends on this same sensitivity. Attunement is the ongoing practice of noticing energy, tone, and silence; of sensing when to pause, when to inquire, and when to let something rest. It is a way of being that treats responsiveness itself as rigor.

In practice, this means listening for what is unsaid, reading the emotional and relational currents in a room, and allowing those currents to inform judgment. Attunement transforms facilitation into presence and evaluation into care.

5. **Accountability (to relationship).** No organism thrives alone. Just as mycelium sustains trees through mutual exchange, RD depends on evaluators' accountability to those with whom they work. This accountability is ethical and relational, not procedural. It calls evaluators to stay answerable and let their judgments be shaped by those who live with their consequences.

In practice, this means maintaining dialogue beyond the final report, returning to communities to share interpretation, and ensuring findings travel back in accessible, useful forms. Accountability is not closure but reciprocity; it keeps judgment alive as a conversation rather than a verdict.

6. **Permission to break the frame.** Mycelium does not stop at garden borders; it follows nutrients where they lead. Reflective Dialogue flourishes when evaluators take similar risks, stepping outside predefined agendas when the ecology of a project demands it. Breaking the frame is not rebellion for its own sake; it is responsiveness to what is real and unfolding in the moment.

In practice, this might mean pausing a meeting to attend to an unspoken tension, redesigning a question mid-study, or extending a conversation that unexpectedly surfaces insight. This is phronesis in action, the practical wisdom to sense when the soil itself is calling for attention.

Together, these six conditions form a mycelial ecology. Beneath the surface, RD decomposes denial, fear, and neutrality into nourishment, weaving networks of trust and care that sustain new growth. Knowledge, like mycelium, is never static. It is always moving, adapting, and reshaping through our dialogue with one another and with the more-than-human world. To ground these ecological conditions in everyday evaluation practice, Appendix A maps them onto tangible evaluator behaviors and design choices. It shows how these philosophical commitments become visible in the gestures, decisions, and relationships that shape real projects.

Many evaluators who claim a more traditional, positivist stance do so from a trained, deep, genuine commitment to accuracy, transparency, and fairness. Reflective Dialogue shares these commitments but challenges the assumption that neutrality or detachment are the paths to achieving them. It does not reject systematic observation or disciplined method; it dethrones them and situates them within the living conditions of context, relationship, and ethics as an inextricable part of knowledge. In doing so, RD retains the valuable lessons and knowledge from conventional approaches while transforming the parts that limit or actively subvert flourishing.

It is important to recognize how philosophical groundings of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology show up in evaluative choices. Table 1 below translates these commitments into their everyday expressions.

*Table 1. Composting Traditional Evaluation Assumptions through Reflective Dialogue*

<b>Philosophical Domain</b>	<b>Traditional Evaluation Assumptions</b>	<b>Reflective Dialogue Re-Grounding</b>
<b>Ontology (What is real?)</b>	Reality is objective, separable, and measurable; evaluators stand outside it.	Being is relational; evaluators are irreducibly entangled with communities, histories, and the more-than-human world. We are not above, we are in.
<b>Epistemology (What counts as knowledge?)</b>	Knowledge is discovered through neutral, technical methods; evaluator is expert/arbitrator.	Knowledge is dynamic, co-created, and contextually situated; evaluators suspend expertise and co-construct meaning.
<b>Axiology (What is valued?)</b>	Neutrality and objectivity are highest values; justice, equity, and relational accountability are “bias.”	Justice, care, humility, and accountability to relationship are central; neutrality is composted as denial.
<b>Methodology (How do we inquire?)</b>	Predetermined designs, rigid agendas, and emphasis on control and closure. Reduction of words to tokens and humans to numbers.	Flexible designs and adaptive, dialogic processes that move at the speed of trust; permission to break the frame and welcome discomfort.

These shifts are not theoretical, they are ecological. Each cell of the table loosens the compacted soil of evaluation, showing how philosophical commitments become living relations. When evaluators move from detachment to connection, from certainty to curiosity, the ground itself changes. Judgment begins to move differently, drawing breath through dialogue, relation, and care.

### **Tilling the Contaminated Soil: Old Ways and New Ways of Being**

Reflective Dialogue asks evaluators to inhabit a posture that resists the habits of neutrality, technical rationality, and compliance that have long been treated as the foundations of our field. These habits promise legitimacy but enact exclusion, sealing off the relational, emotional, and contextual dimensions of knowing. What once began as a pursuit of rigor has hardened into residue, an epistemic sediment made of denial, fear, and the false safety of procedural judgment.

At the beginning of this paper, we imagined a garden whose soil had been saturated with persistent toxins, PFAs that linger unseen and alter the life of everything they touch. In evaluation, those toxins are the residues of an insistence that legitimacy rests in neutrality, that knowledge can be

detached from relationship, and that judgment can be reduced to compliance with rules and criteria. This contamination has compacted the soil of our practice. The air is stale, and life can grow only in constrained and distorted ways.

Tilling this contaminated soil does not mean chipping away at the surface or purging the past. It means staying long enough to compost what has hardened and metabolize the residues of control and fear through relational life. Reflective Dialogue offers this slow, mycelial ecology, where evaluators work with what is already alive beneath the surface, including humility, shared risk, attentiveness, and accountability to relationship. Through these conditions, the soil begins to loosen. Breath returns.

In practice, this tilling looks like refusing the comfort of neutrality when it silences; questioning metrics that masquerade as meaning; and designing spaces where discomfort and contradiction can become data for reflection rather than grounds for dismissal. Each gesture opens the ground for new chemistries of trust, curiosity, and courage to circulate.

Over time, the contaminated ground changes. The toxins remain part of its history, but they lose their hold as life reclaims them. This is the regenerative work of RD, re-grounding evaluation in living soil, capable of sustaining relational judgment, phronesis, and the courage to act.

The following Case Contrasts that follow are hypothetical examples drawn from our own stories we've seen and heard in our own work and from friends and colleagues. These contrasts are meant to show how the same moment can unfold within the depleted soil of the old way or the tended soil of RD.

### ***The Data That Harmed***

***Toxic Soil:*** An evaluation framed around “achievement gaps” produced predictable charts and graphs. The framing was deficit-laden, reducing students and families to what they lacked, and parents and students of color bravely named it as such. The evaluation became a house of mirrors reflecting only absence, reinforcing the very inequities it claimed to illuminate.

***Tended Soil:*** In RD, evaluators slowed down and acknowledged their complicity. They entered dialogue with families to co-create an addendum that reframed the data as evidence of systemic inequity, not individual failure. This act drew from accountability to relationship and permission to break the frame. The final product disrupted neutrality's stain and carried seeds of justice, planting new ways of seeing into the institutional record.

### ***Technician or Witness?***

***Toxic Soil:*** Early-career evaluators, hired as “objective” technicians, produced numbers that were used to praise harmful programs as “evidence-based.” They felt the harm but had been taught to keep quiet. Speaking out felt like professional suicide.

***Tended Soil:*** Through RD, they named their fear with colleagues and claimed their role as judgment-makers accountable to communities, not just contracts. Drawing on shared risk and suspended expertise, they wrote a statement circulated quietly among stakeholders that challenged the program's legitimacy. The act re-anchored their professional identity in relational soil, refusing complicity in harm.

### *Findings Buried Alive*

**Toxic Soil:** An evaluation revealed that housing funds were being withheld from immigrant families. The sponsoring agency buried the report, and evaluators, trained to defer to authority, archived it and moved on. The knowledge was entombed. No change followed.

**Tended Soil:** In dialogue with advocates, evaluators composted futility into courage. They anonymized stories and shared them through trusted community networks. This was attuned holding and adaptive growth in action, protecting participants while refusing to let the truth vanish. Though the official report remained buried, the findings nourished grassroots organizing, spreading unseen like mycelium under the surface until conditions were right for action.

These examples show us the tension we must navigate between neutrality and judgment, compliance and care, safety and risk. Table 2 on the page that follows offers a close-up of this evaluative soil through the three examples, tracing how these tensions live in practice and what becomes possible when we begin to till them through Reflective Dialogue. RD does not deny the tension; it teaches us how to work the soil at its base, loosening what has been compacted so that new forms of understanding and accountability can take root. This is both philosophical and practical work.

To support evaluators in taking this stance, Appendix A offers concrete guidance and actions that nourish RD's mycelial soil and habits that deplete it. These are not checklists or rules but touchstones for judgment in motion, as well as reminders of the gestures that keep the evaluative ecology alive and the conditions that can slowly close its breath.

This is not simply a methodological choice; it is a stand in the soil of our practice. Reflective Dialogue cannot be done alone. It calls evaluators into collective courage, to risk together, hold one another accountable, and bring into view the judgments that have always lived beneath our methods. The soil has been hardened by dominance logics (e.g. positivism, colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, imperialism, etc.), and no single evaluator can break it apart. We till it together, loosening what has been compacted and turning over what no longer serves, seeding the conditions for evaluative work that is alive, responsive, and rooted in our shared responsibility to each other.

Table 2. *From Toxic to Tended Soil: Shifts in Evaluative Judgment*

<b>Case Contrast</b>	<b>Toxic Soil</b>	<b>Tended Soil</b>	<b>Ontological Shift</b>	<b>What RD Surfaces</b>	<b>Possibilities Even Under Constraint</b>
The Data That Harmed	Evaluation framed around institutional categories (“achievement gaps,” “underperformance”) that appear neutral but reproduce deficit logics.	Evaluators begin by questioning inherited language and co-framing inquiry with families, students, and teachers to define what “learning” and “belonging” mean locally.	From assuming separable, measurable entities to recognizing knowledge as relational and historically situated.	That constructs carry institutional residue; naming them is itself an ethical act.	Within state-mandated metrics, evaluators annotate reports to disclose framing limits and offer community-derived terms.
	Data interpreted as evidence that certain students “underperform.”	Data interpreted as evidence that systems under-resource and constrain opportunity.	From locating deficiency in people to locating responsibility in structures.	How analytic choices distribute blame and reify inequity.	Evaluators still meet analytic deliverables while embedding systemic interpretations and recommendations for structural change.
	Evaluator positioned as objective technician maintaining neutrality for credibility.	Evaluator positioned as relational sense-maker accountable to those represented in the data.	From procedural detachment to ethical participation and co-implication.	Evaluator complicity in meaning-making; judgment as moral labor.	Professional norms of neutrality remain, but evaluators model transparency and shared accountability in accompanying narratives.
	Report written in institutional language that satisfies funder templates and closes inquiry.	Report contains co-authored sections or appendices with participants, documenting interpretive dialogue.	From static deliverable to living, revisitable document.	That evaluative products can either seal or extend dialogue.	Even within rigid formats, evaluators include reflective addenda or community commentary to keep sense-making open.
	Process aims for efficiency, certainty, and closure.	Process allows spaciousness, reflection, and adaptation as understanding deepens.	From control to cultivation.	That learning needs time and care.	Even within fixed timelines, evaluators can build in reflective pauses or post-report dialogues.
Technician or Witness?	Evaluators hired as “objective” technicians to deliver evidence supporting existing programs; professional worth tied to compliance and productivity.	Evaluators understand their expertise as relational and ethical, grounded in the consequences of what their findings enable or conceal.	From professionalism as procedural compliance to professionalism as relational integrity.	That neutrality functions as protection for the evaluator and as insulation for systems of power.	Within contract obligations, evaluators can still name tensions between objectivity and responsibility and model ethical reflection in team spaces.

	Data produced to verify effectiveness rather than question harm; evaluators' discomfort remains private.	Evaluators bring discomfort into dialogue with peers, reflecting on how evidence participates in harm and what it means to stay silent.	From silence as professionalism to vulnerability as rigor.	That courage and care are shared, not heroic; accountability can be collective.	Evaluators build small peer-reflective groups within institutions to process moral risk together while meeting deliverable deadlines.
	Accountability flows upward to funders, supervisors, or contractual authorities.	Accountability expands outward to participants, communities, and consequences of findings.	From vertical accountability to horizontal and ecological accountability.	That evaluation operates within networks of impact extending beyond the client.	Even within rigid reporting lines, evaluators can document external stakeholder perspectives or append community feedback.
	Ethical codes interpreted as compliance checklists ensuring procedural propriety.	Ethical reflection practiced as ongoing discernment about power, consequence, and relationship.	From ethics as rule to ethics as living inquiry.	That codes are starting points, not endpoints; integrity must be enacted situationally.	Evaluators can use required ethics statements to introduce reflexive notes on positionality or unresolved tensions.
	Professional advancement measured by efficiency, neutrality, and deliverable satisfaction.	Professional advancement re-imagined as growth in discernment, humility, and responsiveness.	From evaluation as technical service to evaluation as moral practice.	That flourishing in practice involves practical wisdom exercised under uncertainty.	Evaluators cultivate mentoring and reflective supervision practices that honor care alongside competence.
Findings Buried Alive	Evaluation findings suppressed or rewritten to align with organizational interests; knowledge treated as property of the sponsor.	Findings regarded as part of an ongoing relational responsibility; evaluators remain in dialogue with affected communities even after deliverables are submitted.	From knowledge as possession to knowledge as stewardship.	That data have consequences beyond deliverables, and silence is itself a form of action.	Within nondisclosure or ownership agreements, evaluators anonymize narratives or share de-identified learnings through trusted networks.
	Evaluators defer to authority when reports are buried; moral discomfort rationalized as "not my decision."	Evaluators acknowledge discomfort as signal, not liability; they consult peers or communities to discern relational obligations.	From deference to authority to discernment within relationship.	How institutional fear and dependency suppress ethical agency.	Evaluators establish backchannel reflection spaces to consider safe, ethical pathways for honoring suppressed truths.
	The official record presents partial or sanitized truths; the story ends at publication.	Evaluators sustain parallel records (e.g., reflexive memos, oral accounts, or community briefings) that hold the fuller meaning of the work.	From closure as compliance to continuation as care.	That truth-telling is temporal and collective; knowledge must live somewhere.	Even when the formal report is fixed, evaluators seed dialogue that keeps findings alive in other forms (meetings, teaching, advocacy).

	Harmful systems continue unchallenged because findings are buried in bureaucratic archives.	Suppressed insights circulate informally through communities, becoming soil for advocacy, learning, and reform.	From stagnation to composting.	That decay and silence can be reworked into future nourishment.	Evaluators can accompany community partners as thought-partners rather than formal authors, supporting action without violating contracts.
	Evaluator safety depends on invisibility and quiet conformity.	Evaluator safety reimagined as mutual care and distributed courage.	From isolation to interdependence.	That resilience and flourishing depend on relational networks of support.	Within risk-averse institutions, evaluators form alliances that quietly sustain moral imagination and shared witness.

## Looking Ahead: Flourishing Beyond the Present Soil

*There's nothing unreal about the ability of ideals properly formed to guide us toward improving the world, and there is nothing less practical than allowing bad actors and unjust systems to limit your hopes and your aspirations.*

(Brown, 2020)

These words remind us that realism and idealism are not opposing forces but mutualistic ones, entangled companions in the work of evaluation. Reflective Dialogue holds that same tension. It is a disciplined hope of staying in relation with what is real, even when that reality resists our control. As evaluators, our task is not to prove the world as it is but to stay accountable to what it might yet become. Practicing RD is how we learn that balance, returning again and again to dialogue, humility, and relation. Our articulation of RD is not the endpoint of an argument but the starting condition for the next phase of evaluation's life. If we accept that evaluation is not neutral, not rule-bound, and not separate from the systems in which it works, then the question is no longer whether we will change, but how we will choose to compost what no longer sustains life.

Looking ahead, we imagine evaluation as a practice unafraid to meet the crises that will continue to define the decades to come (e.g. climate disruption, mass migration, algorithmic governance, widening inequality) without retreating into technical neutrality. We see evaluators as courageous facilitators, cultivating relationships across communities, sectors, and disciplines, able to adapt and redistribute resources in real time. Yet connection alone is not enough. RD also calls evaluators to act as discerners and asserters of value, to name what matters, hold tension in dialogue, and guide collective judgment toward what sustains life. We anticipate methods and frameworks that are porous rather than prescriptive, capable of braiding Indigenous, feminist, decolonial, and other justice-oriented wisdoms into responses that are local, situated, and alive.

The soil we tend now will determine what grows long after our own hands are gone from it. Our task is to plant in ways that leave future evaluators a living ecology, rich enough to support new roots we cannot yet imagine, resilient enough to resist capture by the next wave of dominance, and generous enough to keep nourishing what matters. In this way, RD becomes the shared inheritance for a future of evaluation oriented toward equity, justice, and flourishing in all its forms.

*When we return to the garden, the soil is looser underfoot. The air carries the hum of roots speaking, threads moving unseen. The blooms are still imperfect, but they lean toward one another now, sharing what they have. This is how the garden will outlive us, by tending the living ground together, season after season. The work will ask us again and again to stay with what is unsettled and resist the urge to turn away when the soil feels hard or the air feels thin. This is part of the tending. If we keep walking this terrain together, remembering discomfort as opportunity, the garden will keep learning how to flourish.*

## References

- Alkin, M. C & Christie, C.A (Eds.) 2019. *Evaluation roots: Theory influencing practice (3rd ed.)*. SAGE Publications.
- Boyce, A. S, Reid, A, Avent, C, Adetogun, A, Moller, J. R & Hooks Singletary, B 2023 ‘Social justice as ontology: The intersection of Black evaluators’ identity, role, and practice.’ *American Journal of Evaluation*, 44(3) pp. 528–548.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10982140221108664>
- Brown, M.J 2020 *Science and moral imagination: A new ideal for values in science*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Chouinard, J.A & Milley, P 2018 ‘Uncovering the mysteries of inclusion: Empirical and methodological possibilities in participatory evaluation in an international context.’ *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 67 pp. 70–78.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.12.001>
- Cousins, J.B & Whitmore, E 1998 ‘Framing participatory evaluation.’ *New Directions for Evaluation*, 1998, 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1114>
- Cram, F 2016 ‘Lessons on decolonizing evaluation from Kaupapa Māori evaluation.’ *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 30(3), 296–312.
- Cram, F 2018 ‘Conclusion: Lessons about indigenous evaluation.’ *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2018(159), 121–133.
- Dahler-Larsen, P 2012 *The Evaluation Society* (1st ed.). Stanford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqsdq12>
- Greene, J. C 2006 ‘Evaluation, democracy, and social change.’ *The Sage Handbook of Evaluation*, pp. 118–140.
- Harro, B 2000 ‘The Cycle of Socialization.’ In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H. Hackman, M. Peters. & X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice*, pp. 16–21. Routledge.
- Hirschman, A. O. 1991 *The rhetoric of reaction: Perversity, futility, jeopardy*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjnrs9q>
- House, E. R 1993 *Professional evaluation: Social impact and political consequences*. Sage Publications.
- Huff, S. R 2025 *Between Empathy and Exhaustion: Exploring Compassion Fatigue in Program Evaluation*. Doctoral Dissertation.

- Kirkhart, K.E 1995 'Seeking multicultural validity: A postcard from the road.' *Evaluation Practice*, 16(1) pp. 1–12.
- Kirkhart, K.E. 2005 'Through a cultural lens: Reflections on validity and theory in evaluation.' In S. Hood, R. Hopson, & H. Frierson (Eds.), *The role of culture and cultural context: A mandate for inclusion, the discovery of truth, and understanding in evaluative theory and practice* (pp. 21-39). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.
- Kuhn, T. S 1962 *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago
- LaFrance, J & Nichols, R 2008 'Indigenous Evaluation Framework: Telling our story in our place and time.' Alexandria, VA: American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC).
- LaFrance, J & Nichols, R 2010 'Reframing evaluation: Defining an Indigenous Evaluation Framework.' *Canadian Journal of Evaluation*, 23, pp. 13–31.
- Linnell, D. J & Montrosse-Moorhead, B 2023 'Navigating the boundaries between evaluators and similar applied professionals.' *Evaluation*, 30(1), pp. 138–161.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890231213643>
- Mertens, D. M 2009 *Transformative research and evaluation*. New York, NY: Guildford Press
- Montrosse-Moorhead, B, Schröter, D & Becho, L. W 2024 'The garden of evaluation approaches.' *American Journal of Evaluation*, 45(2) pp. 166–185.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10982140231216667>
- Picciotto R 2016 'Evaluator anxiety in an inequitable world.' In M. M. Anthony & M. B. Stein (Eds.), *Evaluation for an equitable society* (pp. 217–235). Information Age Publishing.
- Picciotto R 2022 'The psychology of evaluation.' *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 94, 102120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2022.102120>
- Reid, A. M, Boyce, A. S, Adetogun, A, Moller, J. R & Avent, C 2020 'If not us, then who?: Evaluators of color and social change.' *New Directions for Evaluation*, 166 pp. 23–36.
- Schwandt, T. A 2002 *Evaluation practice reconsidered*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Schwandt, T. A & Gates, E. F 2021 *Evaluating and valuing in social research*. The Guilford Press.
- Scriven, M 1967 *The methodology of evaluation*. In R. W. Tyler, R. M. Gagné, & M. Scriven (Eds.), *Perspectives of curriculum evaluation* (pp. 39–83). Rand McNally.
- Scriven, M 1991 *Evaluation thesaurus (4th ed.)*. Sage Publications.

- Scriven, M 2013 'The foundation and future of evaluation.' In S. I. Donaldson & M. Scriven (Eds.), *The future of evaluation in society: A tribute to Michael Scriven* (pp. 11–44). Information Age Publishing.
- Shadish, W. R., Jr., Cook, T. D & Leviton, L. C 1991 *Foundations of program evaluation: Theories of practice*. Sage Publications.
- Symonette, H 2004 'Walking pathways toward becoming a culturally competent evaluator: Boundaries, borderlands, and border crossings.' *New Directions for Evaluation*, 102 pp. 95–109.
- Tovey, T.L.S & Archibald, T 2023 'The relationship between reflective practice, evaluative thinking, and practical wisdom.' In S. Donaldson & M. Hurteau (Eds.), *Practical wisdom for an ethical evaluation practice*. Information Age Publishing.
- Tovey, T.L & Onwuka du Bruyn, O.O 2025 'Our frame is everything: Insights from a Reflective Dialogue on positionality in evaluation.' *American Journal of Evaluation*, 10982140251392821.
- Waapalaneexkweew (Bowman, N, Mohican/Lunaape) & Dodge-Francis, C 2018 'Culturally responsive indigenous evaluation and tribal governments: Understanding the relationship.' In F. Cram, K. A. Tibbetts, & J. LaFrance (Eds.), *Indigenous Evaluation. New Directions for Evaluation*, 159, pp. 17–31.
- Wehipeihana, N 2019 'Increasing cultural competence in support of Indigenous-led evaluation: A necessary step toward Indigenous-led evaluation.' *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 34(2) pp. 368–384.
- Wittgenstein, L 1953 *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

## Appendix A: Engaging Reflective Dialogue in Evaluation Practice

Reflective Dialogue (RD) is a living, relational stance that evaluators inhabit. It depends on an ecology of conditions, sustained gestures, and embodied moves that keep the practice alive in the face of pressures toward speed, mastery, control, and detachment.

The following synthesis offers four layers of guidance:

1. Orienting Conditions
2. Evaluator Gestures
3. RD-Oriented Practices and Observable Shifts in Behavior
4. Working Within Harmful Structures – Survival & Advocacy Advice

### (1) Orienting Conditions: Returning to Relation in Reflective Dialogue

The six enabling conditions described in the manuscript (spaciousness, safety and shared risk, diffusion of expertise, attunement, accountability to relationship, and permission to break the frame) describe the ecology in which Reflective Dialogue can breathe. They show what evaluative practice looks like when reflection circulates as part of the work itself. Yet every ecology shifts. Over time, habits of control, efficiency, and certainty reassert themselves; the soil begins to compact.

The following ten orienting conditions, preceded by a metacondition that names the free-flowing nature of this work, outline how evaluators return to relation when that happens. They are stances of re-attunement, ways of loosening the ground again so humility, accountability, and care can keep circulating through the work.

0. **Undomestic-ability** – This is the metacondition. Reflective work, when real (not performative), carries a refusal. It resists capture. When we step into this work, we enter relation with what exceeds us—other people, context, the more-than-human world, and our own limits.
1. **Being-with (not doing-to)** – Relate without manipulation, extraction, or fixing. Accompany rather than control.
2. **Meaning (not mastery)** – Linger in the not-yet-known. Let questions stretch without collapsing them into tidy answers.
3. **Humility and risk** – Show up with partial truths, vulnerability, and willingness to be changed.
4. **Relational responsibility** – Hold awareness of what you bring and how you carry what others offer.
5. **Kairos – moving in time (not on time)** – Let the work unfold at the pace of trust rather than the clock.
6. **Embodiment** – Attend to breath, posture, and sensation as part of the knowing.
7. **Silence** – Treat stillness as compost, letting meaning ripen before words return.
8. **Power** – Notice asymmetries in voice, safety, and legitimacy. Act to redistribute space and protect risk-taking.
9. **Wonder** – Make room for awe, paradox, and play alongside rigor.

10. **Practice, not arrival** – Return again and again; RD is sustained through repetition, not mastery.

## (2) Evaluator Gestures

The gestures below name what an RD-oriented evaluator tends to in their practice, and what they consciously compost. They are living touchstones for judgment in motion, grown from the enabling conditions named in this paper and span four interdependent dimensions: (1) internal stance, (2) relational practice, (3) technical practice, and (4) system navigation.

What RD-oriented evaluators cultivate	What they compost / refuse
<b>(1) Internal stance</b>	
Interrogate their own positionality and how it shapes the work.	Pretend to be neutral or detached from the systems and communities in which they are entangled.
Hold humility and curiosity as defaults; expect to be changed by the work.	Over-identify with expertise or authority, assuming their knowledge outweighs community knowing.
Tend their own resilience to remain present and responsive across the project's life.	Burn out in service of deliverables, collapsing reflective capacity under rushed timelines.
<b>(2) Relational practice</b>	
Co-create the purpose, scope, and design of the evaluation with those most affected.	Impose pre-determined agendas or frameworks that shut down collaborative sense-making.
Build capacity for dialogue so all participants can engage as meaning-makers.	Tokenize participation, using "input sessions" without integrating what emerges.
Center lived experience alongside other data, giving it full epistemic weight.	Collapse diverse voices into a single tidy narrative, erasing dissent and nuance.
<b>(3) Technical practice</b>	
Adapt methods to context, culture, and moment, welcoming emergence.	Apply cookie-cutter tools without regard for context or consequences.
Embed reflection throughout the process, not just at the end.	Rush interpretation or treat findings as static, closed conclusions.
Surface tensions and hold them without forcing premature resolution.	Mask or sidestep conflict to maintain a false sense of harmony or control.
<b>(4) System navigation</b>	
Negotiate with funders, leadership, and institutions to protect the integrity of RD.	Hide from political realities that shape what can be known and done.
Make transparent how judgments are formed, including uncertainties and shifts in direction.	Use inaccessible, exclusionary language that alienates those the evaluation is meant to serve.
Stay engaged beyond the final deliverable to support interpretation, adaptation, and use.	Cut ties at project close, leaving no space for the afterlife of findings.

### (3) RD-Oriented Practices and Observable Shifts in Behavior

This section shows how RD can be enacted at each stage of an evaluation. It contrasts conventional moves with RD-oriented practices and highlights observable shifts that signal a living, relational, and justice-oriented stance.

Stage / Element	Conventional Evaluation Move	RD-Oriented Practice (Foundational Acts)	Observable Shifts in Behavior / Action
<b>1. Before Engagement</b>	Respond to RFP or internal request by drafting scope from funder's stated needs.	Begin with inquiry into context, history, and existing knowledge; create intentional dialogic space to ask what matters most to those directly affected.	Evaluator spends time in community or organizational spaces before scoping; asks "What's already known?"; brings multiple stakeholders into initial conversation.
<b>2. Entry &amp; Relationship Building</b>	Establish contact with leadership and formal gatekeepers; move quickly to contracts and timelines.	Build relationships across roles, treating humans as knowledge wealth; clarify values, expectations, and decision-making norms together.	Evaluator introduces themselves personally, shares their stance, listens for power dynamics, adapts entry pace to relational readiness rather than fixed deadlines.
<b>3. Defining Questions &amp; Purpose</b>	Frame questions in terms of funder priorities and measurable outcomes.	Co-shape questions through facilitated dialogue, holding space for multiple definitions of success and emergent lines of inquiry.	Evaluator facilitates participatory design sessions; documents different stakeholder aims; allows questions to evolve before finalizing.
<b>4. Design / Method Selection</b>	Select methods for efficiency, comparability, and rigor-as-precision.	Choose methods that support relationship, context, and meaning-making; adapt tools to cultural and situational needs.	Evaluator proposes methods with options; co-designs instruments with stakeholders; adjusts tools midstream based on feedback.
<b>5. Data Collection</b>	Gather data through standardized instruments; prioritize completeness and consistency.	Use approaches that invite dialogue, story, and co-interpretation; collect only what adds value to collective understanding.	Evaluator offers participants multiple ways to contribute; incorporates observation and conversation; avoids redundant collection when existing data suffices.

<b>6. Sensemaking &amp; Analysis</b>	Analyze data independently; synthesize into a single narrative that fits reporting requirements.	Hold collaborative sensemaking sessions; surface multiple perspectives and tensions; name uncertainties openly.	Evaluator schedules joint interpretation meetings; shares raw data excerpts; resists forcing consensus; includes divergent interpretations in outputs.
<b>7. Reporting</b>	Deliver a polished, final report as the authoritative account.	Treat reports as imperfect snapshots of knowledge on the move; present findings in iterative, reviewable formats.	Evaluator shares early drafts for input; issues brief updates at key decision points; frames conclusions as provisional and adaptable.
<b>8. Follow-Up &amp; Knowledge Return</b>	Conclude contract with final report submission; move on to next project.	Stay in conversation beyond deliverables; support adaptation and reuse of findings; return knowledge in accessible, community-owned formats.	Evaluator schedules follow-up calls; shares findings in plain language formats; co-hosts events to discuss use; tracks how insights evolve over time.

#### (4) Working Within Harmful Structures – Survival & Advocacy Advice

Reflective Dialogue-oriented evaluation often unfolds inside systems built on dominance logics. These systems reward proof-chasing, control, and efficiency over relationship, context, and justice. Here’s how to keep RD alive in such contexts and how to advocate for a different way.

- **Model the Change:** Act as you want evaluation to be, slow where possible, relational in every exchange, reflective in every decision. Let your practice itself be an argument for a different kind of science and evaluation.
- **Name and Reframe:** Name the constraints without letting them define the whole work. Say, “The funder requires X, but here’s how we can also capture Y.” Translate RD practices into language that positivist audiences accept (e.g., call “dialogic sensemaking” a “participatory analysis workshop”).
- **Negotiate Space:** Build RD activities into project timelines and budgets from the start. Tie relational practices to outcomes that matter to the system.
- **Layer the Work:** Deliver the required metrics while also embedding co-interpretation, narrative, and context. Treat formal deliverables as vehicles for RD, pairing lived experience with traditional outputs and use each deliverable to open new questions for continued dialogue.
- **Protect Relationships:** Never sacrifice trust for speed. If deadlines force shortcuts, tell stakeholders why and revisit later to repair. Treat relational capital as non-negotiable infrastructure for any evaluation.

- **Use Their Language Strategically:** If a setting demands “rigor,” define it inclusively. Frame rigor as depth, diversity of evidence, and transparency, not just precision. Present RD findings as “complementary” to quantitative evidence, not in competition with it.
- **Leverage Existing Knowledge:** Push back against unnecessary data collection by pointing to credible existing sources, especially community-held knowledge. Document why duplicative “proof” harms efficiency and trust.
- **Be Transparent About Limits:** Say when data is incomplete, when context has shifted, and when certainty is impossible. Frame uncertainty as an ethical stance, not a weakness.
- **Build Allies:** Identify community members and leaders who can champion RD internally. Share small wins and stories that demonstrate the practical value of dialogic approaches.
- **Keep the Door Open:** End every deliverable, meeting, and report with an invitation for further dialogue. Treat every product as part of a living record, not the final word.
- **Keep Practicing, Often and Openly:** Treat every project, meeting, or deliverable as a rehearsal for a different kind of evaluation. Even small acts of reflection, like five minutes of shared noticing, or a question that invites meaning rather than proof, keep the rhythm of RD alive inside systems that reward control. Regular practice is resistance; each repetition composts dominance logics into soil where new possibilities can grow.
- **Stay Vigilant and Flexible:** Treat every phase of the work as dynamic. Scan for changes in relationships, context, and politics that could threaten or open space for RD. Shift tactics quickly when needed, while holding fast to the values that anchor your practice.