

KU04 Discussion Paper

‘Pragmatic evaluation & knowledge use in developing practice’

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In this paper I offer some thoughts and issues about evaluation research in the context of developing practice. The focus on developing practice is adopted as essentially knowledge utilisation is about the translation of evidence into practice and the development of new knowledge about the ensuing processes and outcomes.

Evaluation is said to refer to the everyday occurrence of making judgements of worth. When we think about developing practice, we recognise that for the most part, we are engaged in a formalised programme of activities, with the purpose of demonstrating the effectiveness (or not) of development processes and outcomes. Evaluation in this context is more than the making of everyday judgements, but instead implies the systematic utilisation of scientific methods and techniques for the purpose of making an evaluation of the ‘worth’ of a programme, demonstrating progress towards achieving specific objectives, or as a basis for learning about the refinements required in the processes used.

In work that is focused on the development of practice, it is important that a programme is realistic in itself before any evaluation is established. With this in mind, contemporary evaluation literature has challenged some of the original definitions of evaluation that largely focus upon ‘measuring predicted or determined outcomes’. Contemporary evaluation (or what is often referred to as a fourth generation of evaluation design) embraces many perspectives that broadly aim to determine the value (or worth) of a programme, including, the achievement of intended and unintended outcomes; intended and unintended consequences and benefits to individuals and communities. Owen & Rogers (1999) therefore describe the object of an evaluation as – negotiating an evaluation plan; collecting and analysing evidence to produce findings; and disseminating the findings to intended audiences, for use in, describing or understanding a programme or making judgements and/or decisions related to that programme. In embracing this description, Owen & Rogers suggest that evaluators have expanded the range of questions asked in an evaluation to include questions about:

- What is needed?
- What are the components of this programme and how do they relate to each other?
- What is happening in this programme?
- How is the programme performing on a continuous basis?
- How could we improve this programme?
- How could we repeat the success of this programme elsewhere?

(Owen & Rogers, 1999: 3)

Whilst there appears to be common agreement in contemporary evaluation literature that evaluation designs need to embrace a range of questions (such as those listed above), there remains a tendency for ‘objective truth’ to dominate evaluation methodology with the emphasis on seeking what is ‘*fact*’ and ‘*true*’ in any programme of work. Thus experimentation and control of factors that can impact on outcomes continues to be seen as the most accurate way of determining the worth of a programme. However, there is growing recognition that this objectivity fails to capture the range of perspectives that comprehensive

evaluation captures nor indeed does it reflect the range of stakeholder values implicit and explicit in an evaluation design. This is evident in many UK national funded R&D programmes where there is an explicit call for proposals from a range of methodological perspectives (from purely descriptive to purely outcome measurement and everything in between!) [see for example the NHS Service Delivery and Organisation (SDO) Research Programme <http://www.sdo.lshtm.ac.uk/index.html> where a range of projects are commissioned utilising a wide range of evaluation methodologies. However, evaluation research appears to largely fall into a number of broad methodological schema:

- *Positivist* with a focus on the measurement of outcome
- *Interpretive* with a focus on the meanings attached to developments from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders
- *Realist* with a focus on determining the relationships between particular development strategies operationalised in a particular context and the outcomes achieved

Within the broad methodological perspectives, the continuum of work from purely descriptive to purely outcome focused can be contained and a variety of data collection methods utilised. The necessity of these contrasting (and increasingly complementary) approaches to evaluation, reflect a more explicit recognition of the complexity of processes used in developing practice and the challenges of measuring both the processes and outcomes involved. In knowledge utilisation, evaluations always take place in a values context, i.e. a programme of work is usually carried out in a specific context that has both implicit and explicit values associated with it. McCormack *et al* (2002) in a concept analysis of ‘practice context’ identified the sub-elements of leadership, culture and evaluation as being particularly important and each of which have a particular set of stated or unstated values, depending on the particular context. Thus it can be argued that for an evaluation to be comprehensive, logical and inclusive, arguments about the merits (or otherwise) of quantitative versus qualitative methodologies are superfluous and instead, evaluation designs need to embrace a range of methods that can be grouped within quantitative or qualitative methodologies but which more importantly can adequately answer the stated evaluation question(s). Thus the only true judgement of ‘worth’ of a programme is the quality of the evidence provided and whether the evidence collected answers the evaluation question(s) asked.

McCormack & Manley (2004) argue that the primary purpose of any evaluation framework should be to answer five essential questions about programmes/actions/interventions:

- Whether it works.
- Why it works.
- For whom it works.
- Under what circumstances it works.
- What has been learnt to make it work?

These five questions are important in the context of knowledge utilisation and developing practice, for three reasons. Firstly, many developments in healthcare practice are often criticised for being unsystematic, non-rigorous and with little evidence to support their transferability. Focusing on these five questions would enable the adoption of a systematic approach to the development work and its evaluation. Secondly, if developing practice activities are to contribute to the evidence base of nursing practice, then nurses should be able to review the evidence base underpinning the practice developments before adopting the developments in their own practice. This of course is an issue of transferability of evidence

but it is also an argument for the need for rigour in practice development designs. Thirdly, answering the questions “under what circumstances does a particular development work?” and “what has been learnt to make it work?” enables the consumer of a practice development report to make judicious decisions about the applicability of the practice to their own particular context. This is different to being able to ‘systematically review’ research evidence, but is instead an argument for practice developers to make explicit the ‘audit trail’ (the decisions, actions and processes) of their development work and a ‘thick description of the practice development context. Such descriptions enable teams to make decisions about the usefulness (or not) of the development work or its underpinning principles to their particular practice context. Quinn-Patton (1997:20) presents a detailed approach to what he terms ‘*Utilization-Focused Evaluation*’. He argues that the worth of any evaluation activity is the utility of the results to ‘real people in the real world’ and asserts that “...evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use”. The fifth question is focused on this objective, as learning from the activities that enabled or hindered the development is a key part of the rigour of a developing practice programme and a key focus of the ‘new knowledge’ generated.

In order to make effective decisions about evaluation design in the development of practice, the following key questions need to be considered (adapted from McCormack & Manley, 2004)

Values, beliefs, purpose

1. What are the beliefs and values about knowledge utilisation held by the commissioners of the work?
2. What is the purpose of the development work?
3. What are the intended outcomes?
4. What are the anticipated outcomes?

Stakeholders

5. Who are the stakeholders involved?
6. What do the commissioners of the work and other stakeholders want from an evaluation? i.e. what expectations do they have of the evaluation?
7. Whose agenda(s) dominate?

Roles

8. What is your role? i.e. facilitator integrated with lead evaluator or one or the other?
9. What is your role in the organisation?
10. What is your role in the knowledge utilisation programme?

Engagement and widening participation

11. Can the potential enthusiasts and potential blockers be identified?
12. What needs to be done to gain participation?

Support mechanisms

13. How will you balance your time in order to balance action and evaluation
14. Do you need to take time to negotiate issues of power in the programme and how this will be managed?
15. How will you build in time for reflection into the programme?

16. How will mechanisms for support for programme participants be built into the programme?

Evaluation design

17. What are your evaluation questions?
18. What is the most appropriate evaluation design?
19. What skills are needed to undertake the evaluation and are these readily available?
20. What data will be collected?
21. What are the ethical implications of your evaluation approach?

Time frames, monitoring and resources

22. Are time-lines planned realistically, taking account of time needed for planning and negotiation?
23. How will participation be continuously increased in the programme and how will this be accounted for in the evaluation?
24. How will evaluation data be used to help with maintaining momentum?
25. What resources are available to enable evaluation?

Accountability mechanisms and management of conflict

26. How will conflict be managed?
27. Given the available time, what can be realistically achieved?
28. What ownership do you have over the evaluation findings?
29. Who are you accountable to for the evaluation strategy and its achievement?
30. What mechanisms will enable you to monitor progress?

References

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