Knowledge transfer

Transferring knowledge to influence 'small p' policy development: examples from the implementation of integrated service delivery systems

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A DEBATE HAS LONG raged within the field of evaluation about the extent to which, and manner in which, knowledge gained from evaluation research results is successfully transferred from evaluators to policy-makers and program decision-makers. This debate, which has been reviewed and summarized elsewhere (Shea, 1991), has had a number of highlights. For example, Weiss (1966) was among the first evaluators to raise the question publicly. Later, many others, including Dunn, Mitroff and Deutsch (1981) and Cook (1984), seriously questioned the continued viability of evaluation given the prevalence of perceptions of the lack of usefulness of the findings.

Early evaluators also could not agree on what constituted successful knowledge transfer or 'evaluation utilization'. Suchman (1967), for example, narrowly defined evaluation utilization as the direct use of evaluation findings by program administrators in determining actual decisions about a program's operations. Subsequent research on how evaluation results are actually utilized has demonstrated that this is an overly restrictive definition.

Building on the work of Havelock (1969) and others at the Centre for Research on the Utilization of Scientific Knowledge at the University of Michigan, subsequent definitions began to reflect a more expansive concept. For example, Weiss
(1972) defined program evaluation utilization as occurring when the results of an evaluation contribute to subsequent program decision-making and the improvement of future programming. This view recognized the indirect, conceptual nature of some instances of program evaluation utilization but was still somewhat restrictive.

By 1977, the definition had further expanded to clearly include both instrumental and conceptual uses. According to Rich (1977), instrumental use occurs when research findings are specifically cited in making a program or policy decision. Conceptual use occurs when the research findings influence the thinking of policy-makers, who may then make future plans for use of the information. Rich contended that conceptual uses should not be viewed as failures, that both types of use are important in their own right and that conceptual uses of evaluation findings during the process of program planning and development are very important. Rich was the first to clearly delineate both instrumental and conceptual program evaluation utilization and to strongly emphasize the importance of the indirect, conceptual variety.

Based on their review of the theoretical and empirical literature on program evaluation utilization, Leviton and Hughes (1981) noted three main definitions: instrumental, conceptual, and persuasive. They observed that Rich's (1977) distinction had been supported by a number of empirical investigations. As a result, the importance and existence of both types of program evaluation utilization was firmly established. In addition, Leviton and Hughes (1981) argued that evaluation findings could be used in a third manner — persuasive utilization, defined as attempts to persuade others to continue to support a program or line of action or to abandon it based upon evaluation findings.

In this paper, a number of specific examples are used to illustrate how knowledge obtained from evaluation research findings has been successfully transferred by evaluators to program policymakers and decision-makers to assist them in refining program policies to 'make the program work'. Examples of both 'instrumental' and 'conceptual' utilization will be discussed. Information is presented on a number of evaluation strategies which have facilitated the desired knowledge transfer. But first, there is a brief discussion of the policy/decision content from which these examples are drawn.

Policy/decision context

The Ontario government has recently developed various policies which mandate the integration of children's services in a number of sectors. One specific initiative has led to the creation of a new program of multi-disciplinary children's services in six separate sites. This program was created by combining existing providers of health, mental health and special education services into new relationships and structures at both the administrative and service delivery levels. A description of this program has recently been published elsewhere (Shea et al., 1993).

The 'big P' Policy under which the program was funded was already established when the evaluators arrived on the scene. The policy statement mandated the creation of the program and specified a number of intended parameters that included: the number and types of staff to be hired; the target groups; the management structures; and a requirement that internal program monitoring and external program evaluation procedures be developed. This statement did not, however, provide specific detail about many facets of the intended service delivery processes. Much of this level of 'small p' policy development was left to the program implementors and local management groups in the six separate sites. The focus of this paper will therefore be at the level of 'small p' site-level policy development of this program.

An implementation evaluation, involving all six separate sites, has produced a substantial amount of data on how and where the development of 'small p' program policies has been influenced by knowledge generated from evaluation activities. The program evaluators, who are from an external, university-based research institute, have had close and continuous interactions with program decision- and policy-makers at both the total program and site levels since initial program operations. The evaluators have consciously and openly employed a utilization-focused approach (Patton, 1986). To date, six reports have been produced, with a number of others planned over the course of the research project, which continues through mid-1995.

The remainder of the paper will present a number of examples of where and how evaluation findings were utilized by program stakeholders to modify existing program policies and to create new ones. Particular attention will be given to the processes employed which facilitated the transfer of knowledge from the evaluators to the program's policy- and decision-makers.

Influencing policy development

As noted earlier, the evaluators were brought in from outside the program to assist a diverse group of stakeholders in evaluating the implementation of a complex new program in six separate sites. A number of the broader aspects of program policy were already defined, creating a set of basic program elements to be implemented at each site. The evaluators' role was to evaluate the extent to which the policies were successfully implemented as in-
tended and to explain any variations in implement-
ation among the sites.

However, as already explained, most of the
operational policies required to operate the pro-
gram were not established prior to its implementa-
tion. A number of key individuals (one Regional
and three Area Coordinators, and six site-level
Program Managers) and one layer in the programs' 
management system (six site-level interagency
management committees) were responsible for im-
plementing the program as intended by the overall
policy and for developing the 'small p' policies
required for the program to function at the site
level.

The evaluators' roles were more complex,
because some areas of required policy develop-
ment at the site level could be anticipated but
others could not. The evaluators consciously se-
lected and employed a number of evaluation
strategies and processes in their attempts to facili-
tate the transfer of their findings to the key indi-
viduals and committees. A number of the more
important strategies and evaluation techniques will
now be introduced.

**Evaluation strategies and techniques**

A number of specific evaluation techniques and
mechanisms have facilitated knowledge transfer
for 'small p' policy development within this
program.

**Identification of needs**

The evaluators spent considerable pre-evaluation
effort (and resources) on consultations with pro-
gram stakeholders to identify their information
needs and translate these into evaluation ques-
tions. Care was taken to ensure that the questions
addressed not only the needs of the senior policy/
decision-makers but also those of the stake-
holders at the site-level. Although there was partial
overlap in the questions which interested the two
groups, there were a substantial number of informa-
tion needs/requests which were unique to each
subsection.

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The evaluators' role with regard to
the set of program policies was to
evaluate the extent to which the
policies were successfully
implemented as intended and to
explain any variations in
implementation among the sites

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**Management information system**

The evaluators assisted program stakeholders to
design and implement a computerized, manage-
ment information system (MIS) for the program.
The MIS was consciously designed to serve two
purposes:

- to provide ongoing information on program
  processes which would be of use to decision-
  makers in ongoing program management; and
- to provide the evaluators with some of the data
  required to evaluate the success of intended
  program implementation.

**Initial negotiations**

Prior to undertaking the project, the evaluators
conducted initial negotiations with senior pol-
icy/decision-makers regarding how and when
evaluation findings could be presented (see Lewko
et al, 1991 for a more complete discussion of this
issue).

**Evaluation advisory committee**

The evaluators formed a program evaluation advi-
sory committee (PEAC) of site-level program de-
cision-makers. It consisted of a representative
of each of the site-level program management com-
mittees and the team of Coordinators. An initial
meeting was held to clarify the committee's role
and to obtain formal agreement from members as
to its terms of reference. The committee agreed to
review evaluation procedures and instruments, to
facilitate data collection and to review report drafts
prior to distribution.

The evaluators took considerable trouble to
educate these key stakeholders as to what the
evaluation could and could not be expected to tell
them. In addition, conscious effort was put into
developing this group's ownership of the evalu-
ation processes, instruments and reports. PEAC
representatives were given the tasks of reporting
on evaluation activities to their management com-
mittees and of communicating their fellow man-
agement committee members' concerns or
questions about the evaluation processes to the
evaluators.

One positive spin-off of the empowerment of
PEAC members and Area Coordinators in the
evaluation process was the development, in one
site, of an Action Plan system for monitoring the
utilization of evaluation findings in program devel-
opment. This format allowed the site-level man-
agement committee (and the evaluators) to easily
trace the completion of program changes which
were initiated by evaluation findings. The regional
(whole program) management committee recog-
nized the value of this system and later mandated
its adoption in the other five program sites.
Implementation evaluation and knowledge transfer

Specific stakeholder presentation

The evaluators provided both overall program and site-specific data and findings to subgroups of stakeholders in response to the different sets of information needs which they had delineated earlier. They worked closely with the Area Coordinator and PEAC representatives from each site to ensure that they understood the meaning and implications of their site-specific data for local policy development. Following these briefings, the PEAC representatives and Coordinators were then prepared to present the findings, along with their recommendations for policy development, to their site-level management committees.

Multiple reports

A system of multiple reports was selected, to ensure that the evaluation findings were made available in a timely fashion to facilitate utilization. By providing manageable sets of evaluation data every few months, the evaluators ensured that the program stakeholders were not overwhelmed with data.

Both written and oral reporting formats were used. The evaluators gave numerous presentations to site-level management committees and to groups of line staff. To date, there have been five written reports and a multitude of oral ones. A wide distribution of all evaluation reports was ensured. Presentations regarding evaluation processes and results were made to subgroups of stakeholders including line staff, site-level managers, area-level managers, senior policy-makers, and professional and academic conferences.

The evaluators published an Evaluation Newsletter on a quarterly basis and distributed it widely to all staff, management committee members and other interested parties. This provided highlights of findings and previewed upcoming data collection efforts and reports.

Examples of direct utilization

Four specific examples of direct, instrumental utilization of evaluation findings in one specific program site will now be presented. Each will be connected to how the evaluation processes facilitated the knowledge transfer for 'small p' policy development.

The first evaluation report (Shea and Lewko, 1992a) identified a lack of knowledge of the intended roles of program management committees by line staff members. The evaluators performed additional site-level data analysis which identified the specific sites where this issue was of particular concern. This data was presented to, and discussed with, the Area Coordinator and PEAC member from the sites in question. These two representa-

A lack of knowledge was identified of the intended roles of program management committees by line staff members: the site-level committee decided to make an annual presentation to staff detailing the terms of reference and major past activities.

tives then presented this finding to the site-level management committee as a whole. As a result, the site-level program management committee decided to make a formal presentation to the staff group to clarify the committee's terms of reference and to detail its major past activities. The committee agreed that this should be an annual presentation due to staff turnover.

The second evaluation report (Shea and Lewko, 1992b) identified and highlighted significant unplanned/undesirable deviations of a subgroup of key staff members (Satellite Workers) from their main intended role (as case managers). This applied to a number of sites and, once again, additional site-specific data was provided to the PEAC representative and Coordinator.

On the site in question this led to the committee deciding to re-emphasize the intended role of Satellite Workers by rewriting their approved job description for their site (included in the site-level Policy and Procedures Manual); to create a new section on Case Management for their Policy and Procedures Manual; to direct their Program Manager to review all Satellite Workers' caseloads; to refer inappropriate cases elsewhere; and to set up a system for providing ongoing monitoring/feedback to individual Satellite Workers and their host organizations to ensure that they perform the intended role. In this site, these changes contributed to an almost 100% increase in multiple problem referrals (the primary target group) between 1991 and 1992.

This report also identified a lack of coordination/cooperation between Program Managers and Clinical Supervisors from ISNC-sponsoring organizations. Once again site-specific data was discussed with the affected Coordinator and PEAC representative. After discussion, the site-level management committee made a decision to direct the Program Manager and Clinical Supervisors to negotiate formal written protocols. The committee then reviewed the draft interorganizational protocols and formally accepted them as site-level program policy (now included in their Manual).

The third evaluation report (Shea and Lewko, 1992c) identified a substantial gap between the amount of desired and actual participation by non-
ISNC service providers in local program planning. As with earlier findings, this was discussed in detail with the Coordinators and PEAC for which it was most salient. As a direct result of their presentation on this issue, the program’s site-level management committee directed its Program Manager to specifically target this subgroup with a series of annual service provider forums aimed at eliciting their input into ongoing local program development.

Indirect (conceptual) utilization

In addition to the direct influences on policy development, a number of examples of indirect, conceptual utilization of evaluation findings at the program site and overall program level occurred.

One indirect result of the process of clarifying program stakeholders’ vision of their intended program model was the identification of a number of desirable features of ‘generic’ integrated service delivery systems. The recognition of the potential conceptual importance of these findings led to the dissemination of this knowledge to the regional committee to share with their ministries, and to a conference paper and journal article by evaluators aimed at a broader policy audience.

The identification of the critical nature of the role of the Satellite Worker in relating to non-ISNC service providers has assisted the senior policy-makers in developing a broader understanding of this role and of the whole program in providing a total package of care. The senior policy-makers have directed the evaluators to specifically investigate this issue further.

The lessons learned in implementing local, interagency management committees have been documented by the evaluators, who produced detailed briefing notes for the Regional Coordinator to present to senior policy people from the major funding ministry who are now developing new, broader service integration policies.

Summary and conclusions

Knowledge transfer from program evaluators to policy-makers and program decision-makers should not be left to chance. Experiences gained from a multi-site implementation evaluation highlighted a number of strategies and techniques which evaluators may employ to increase the likelihood that their findings may be utilized to influence the development of ‘small p’ program policies and procedures. The evaluators in this situation engaged in a number of pre-evaluation activities which both enhanced and protected their ability to transfer knowledge about program implementation to program stakeholders when it became available.

The active and conscious effort by evaluators to assist stakeholders in developing a feeling of ‘ownership’ of the evaluation and the data it produced played a critical role in facilitating the transfer of evaluation findings in site-level program policies.

A number of instances of direct, instrumental utilization of evaluation findings in making decisions about local program policies were discussed. This type of use of evaluation findings was very common and many more examples could have been presented. The evaluation utilization ‘Action Plan’ format developed by the program stakeholders made it very simple to trace the effects on local program policies of this type of knowledge transfer. It is possible that the use of this type of evaluation may be more likely at ‘small p’ policy levels than at the level of larger-scale policies.

Although more difficult to clearly trace, a number of examples of indirect, conceptual utilization were also presented. It may be that this type of use of evaluation findings is more likely at ‘bigger p’ levels. In addition, as Rich (1977) has reported, instances of conceptual utilization often occur many months after evaluation findings have been made available to policy-makers.

The situation described, in which evaluators were able to employ a style of evaluation practice which provides for the involvement of program stakeholders in the planning, operation and dissemination/utilization of the evaluation, is a particularly good vehicle for observing knowledge transfer for ‘small p’ policy development. An implementation evaluation is also a particularly favourable environment for this to occur. The presence of both sets of favourable antecedents for successful knowledge transfer clearly facilitated the high-level influence on policy development observed here. However, although perhaps not as easy to obtain under other less favourable conditions, it is likely that knowledge transfer from evaluators to program decision- and policy-makers for the purpose of ‘small p’ policy development can be attained in other circumstances through the combined efforts of program stakeholders and evaluators.

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