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Social Care Evidence in Practice: An English perspective
Blog Editor

by George Julian

I'm typing this sat in the beautiful Banff Springs hotel in Canada where I've spent the last couple days at #KTNConf Inspiring Change. Organised and hosted by the Health Research Transfer Network of Alberta (RTNA), this conference has focused on the role of knowledge transfer in inspiring change. Rarely have I had the privilege to attend such a warm and friendly, insightful and broad ranging conference. Today alone I heard about maternal health, homelessness and mental health, built environment and early years, Well Doc? initiative on physician stress, storytelling and aboriginal trauma, enhanced surgery and recovery, parent narratives of life in a neonatal intensive care unit and mathematics teaching for children with feotal alcohol spectrum disorder. All in one day, together with great opportunities for networking and poster presentations, lightening talks and a very entertaining gameshow after dinner of Knowledge Transfer Jeopardy. It's been a seriously great day, I've got that mid conference buzz, brain ache and exhaustion all rolled into one.

So what better thing to do than share my presentation slides and a little context for the points behind them. I am completely indebted to my colleagues at LSE for providing me with financial support and also encouraging me to share our learning from the SCEiP project. What follows however are my thoughts and reflections of the project so far, there is no guarantee that other members of the team or collaborators would hold the same view, but this was my thoughts on our journey and learning so far and hopes for the future. I hope you find it interesting and be sure to feedback here or via twitter @LSE_SCEIP.

Social Care Evidence in Practice: An English perspective

The presentation is in six parts: context and introduction; what people tell us stops them from using research; what people tell us helps them to use research; methods used in year one of the project; our learning so far and future possibilities, and take away messages.

Context and introduction (Slides 1-14)

The first slide features a photo of a venn graph from JessicaHagy and was used to request that people interrupt, talk and stop me if I didn't make sense, no point travelling that far just to confuse people. I suspect the slides that follow are mostly self-explanatory, they introduce my journey, social care, some researchers from PSSRU, the funding and collaboration arrangements and the fact SCEiP is one year old. The climate of social care in the UK was situated using infographics produced by @TheKingsFund for the Barker Commission, the research impact context used an old diagram from Patrick Dunleavy and the three strands of the project were introduced, before my favourite photo of how *not* to engage people with research.

What people tell us stops them using research (Slides 15-25)

The project builds on knowledge transfer literature that covers this question and what follows are the factors that people have mentioned in workshops and conversations since we started: they're too busy or don't have time, constant overloads and demands and the requirement to just move faster and do more, the fact that some people report that fear researchers, and linked to fear is an inferiority complex issue and the belief that researchers are incredibly clever. Lack of IT access, social media access and tied to that lack of journal access is also reported as a challenge. Researchers and practitioners both report that they meet closed doors and it is not easy to access the other, the merry-go-round links to constant organisational and political change and that feeling that even when it stops and you get off, you're too dizzy to really get straight into good work as you try to find your feet again. This is alongside a reported need to be seen to be busy, and a sense that never could you be seen to be reading research or studying during in work time when colleagues are overloaded and caseloads growing, like somehow improving your practice isn't as important as practising. Finally, this slide, reports a problem often articulated by social care professionals, while researchers may indeed enjoy the writing reports, social care professionals and social workers report that bureaucracy holds them back – so the last thing they are likely to want is more paperwork or reading.

What people tell us helps them to use research (Slides 26-32)

First up is bite size chunks of information, it doesn't need to always be a three course meal of evidence, or indeed a whole menu, sometimes just small tasty bites will do. People also report that regular updates, contacts and signposting to research helps otherwise they can feel overwhelmed or lost. The throwing of stones slide wasn't simply an excuse to get my beloved Meadfoot Beach into the presentation, it was used to illustrate that for people to truly feel comfortable learning and changing behaviour they need a climate of no-blame, where there is space to experiment, ask questions and managers lead by example, so no throwing stones or pointing fingers. The next two slides feature 50 things to do before you're 11 3/4 by the National Trust. I absolutely love that campaign and it really deserves a blog post in it's own right, it was used in this presentation to illustrate encouraging people to start our and try, not to be overwhelmed by the scale of the task, and also to demonstrate that there are a vast array of methods to use. The second slide illustrates the power of having a related online space where people can go to find out more and to continue learning or networking. The final slide was used to illustrate the strength of team work, a shared vision and identity.

Methods used in Year One (Slides 33-41)

The post it note's throughout the presentation were collected during workshops and meetings over the last year and illustrate what people wished from the project. The next slide introduced the unconference that we held in September 2012 to set the project agenda, and also illustrates beautifully the strength of visual notetaking/graphic facilitation to share complex messages in an engaging manner. The excellent sketching is done by the brilliant Nat Al-Tahhan and personally I never tire of seeing it! Next up is a mention of social media, with a particular focus on blogging and tweeting for the project – lots more we could do but still well received this year. The post it note that follows that introduces the project work bringing practitioners and researchers together to develop a joint framework on prevention. Next up mapping, signposting and auditing to understand the existing landscape, before a great question from the unconference asking why some pieces of research do make it through to practice, and are regularly cited again and again. This links to the work that RAND Europe are conducting through bibliometric analysis and taking a historical look at investment in social care research and outputs from it to try and put a value on research. The final methods used slide features a photo taken at Community Care Live and illustrates our use of conferences and workshop methods. Other methods mentioned included mentoring of practitioners by researchers and practice research projects, and video.

Our learning so far (Slides 42-46)

Superheroes and champions, they're great, everyone needs them and you can't get enough of them but ultimately they're not a long term solution. We have some brilliantly committed people who understand research and are passionate about the role it can play in improving practice, but while it's great to have those superheroes supporting this project if we want to really make a sustainable difference and learn what works for a wide range of people then we need to get past those people who already see the value of research. Engaging them is the easy bit, but I believe that we need to aim higher and I hope that in year two of this project we will get a chance to explore methods that take us into contact with people we've not met before and take us that bit further into things. The next slide was used to illustrate the learning that if we don't lay down some boundaries, and stick to them, we can lose clarity and perspective. This is a particular issue where two of our collaborators (research in practice for adults and Social Services Research Group) have quite overlapping networks and contacts. The final slide in this section was used to illustrate that people seem to like it when you show your workings out! They like being up close and personal with researchers/practitioners, being able to interact, ask questions and record information in a format suitable to them and face-to-face contact helps to break down barriers and build trust. Other learning was around identifying a hook and engaging with the issues that mattered to individuals which helps build access and engagement and also some reflections on the power of digital methods to engage and connect people, build and maintain momentum around a matter of shared interest.

Future possibilities (Slides 47-58)

I forgot to warn people about the spider before flashing up that close and personal shot but no-one fainted so hopefully it went ok! This was used to illustrate our very initial webinars, his web isn't that strong because we've only done one so far, but we're likely to use the method again and trial it out further. Next up was working together to support practitioners to become involved with commissioning research and setting research agendas, engagement activities where researchers are hands on with the general public and switching mentoring on it's head so practitioners are mentoring researchers (I'm loathed to call it reverse mentoring because that infers researchers mentoring practice is the usual/best way). Other possibilities include conferences and workshops (although potentially with a focus on changing researcher behaviour rather than practice focused), ongoing face to face and speed dating, journal clubs and networks, strategic partnerships forming, internships and newsletters. I love animations and the next slide shared two of my favourites, a new one from The Kings Fund sharing Sam's story focusing on integrated care and the difference it can make, and a slightly older one from IRISS looking at measuring outcomes; I'd love to see the SCEiP project explore the role of animation and more visual methods. Other methods include the development of a mobile app, more videos and online discussion, and then we moved into food and edible knowledge exchange. First up was breakfast with a researcher or practitioner, which you could also link with a hashtag and involve people virtually, a similar approach would be researcher hot seat or expert drop in sessions. I couldn't resist the opportunity to share Social Care Curry Club as an example of people coming together to share, learn and discuss, and finally my dream of a knowledge transfer ice cream van that will literally take ice cream and knowledge transfer messages to the people.

Take aways (Slides 59-63)

Short and sweet really – stay curious, keep asking questions of ourselves and each other, and continue to work at finding new ways and exploring unchartered territory. You might come up with a terrible idea, or you might crack something and make real progress. Some days you just need to force your way forward, resilience and strength are key, and opportunities like this conference and social media, provide the ability to support each other and connect and recharge. Finally, the future is bright and together we will continue to make real progress to understanding how to improve research and ensure its corproduced and useful to all.

Signposting

LSE Social Care Evidence in Practice @LSE_SCEIP and website

Jessica Hagy @jessicahagy her website where you can buy her excellent books This is Indexed

The Kings Fund @TheKingsFund and their website

National Trust @nationaltrust and their 50 things to do before you're 11 3/4 campaign website

Nat Al-Tahann @NatAltDesign and her website

RAND Europe @RANDEurope and their website

Research in practice for adults @ripfa and their website

Social Services Research Group @SSRGUK and their website

Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services @IRISSOrg and their website

Social Care Curry Club @SocialCareCurry and the website

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