Evaluating knowledge utilization: Searching twisty trails, mainly in the dark

PANEL ON: REFLECTIONS ON KNOWLEDGE UTILIZATION: CONNECTING RESEARCH TO EVALUATION PRACTICE
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Evaluation of knowledge utilization

- Knowledge-producing organizations are keen to learn how knowledge is being used
- Long established that knowledge utilization is
  - Accretive, cumulative (e.g., Weiss 1980)
  - Indirect, non-linear (Kirkhart 2000)
  - Hence, unpredictable
- Conventional evaluation relies on “roadmaps to outcomes” to guide data collection
  - Key problem when evaluating knowledge utilization: how do you know what to look for?
How do you know what to look for?

- You don’t!
  - Risk: miss important unpredicted data on uptake and application of knowledge, thereby underestimating impact
  - Risk: focus on known examples of application, thereby overestimating impact
- Potential solution: broaden & deepen the search field
- Three approaches: example evaluations of four programs
Approach 1: Search for clues in the canopy, not just on the ground

- Evaluation in a ‘knowledge transfer’ mode tends to focus on dissemination and use of ‘knowledge products’ : concrete packages (documents, tools, training)

- Example 1: Evaluation of a program aiming to develop capacity in public health systems to influence planning decisions by municipal and regional governments to create healthier built environments
Example 1

- While some tools were developed, much ‘KT’ happened outside them
- For planning sector partners (“knowledge users”), survey measures assessed the extent and results of: (% yes, year 1 data, n = 34 planning organizations)
  - Using tools, resources or other types of knowledge products developed by public health (26%)
    Vs.
  - Sharing knowledge, technical advice, expertise or recommendations (82%)
  - Attending meetings or events organized by public health (76%)
  - General support and strategic alliance (53%)
  - Having public health be part of their meetings or events (32%)
  - Other (42%)
Approach 2: Study the forest, not the trees

- Evaluation of knowledge mobilization or transfer often focuses on the results of specific knowledge generation projects
  - But projects are situated in a relationships between knowledge producers and users in which more mobilization may be occurring
- Examples 2/3: Evaluations of applied health research program aiming to improve health systems
Examples 2/3

- Multiple-case studies
  - Case units of analysis larger than a project: covered the range of activities linked to the producer/user relationships
  - 19/10 cases, selected along two dimensions:
    - Diversity: of domains, levels and types of organizations
    - Performance: stakeholders nominated “exemplary” cases, and evaluators randomly chose the others
    - Interviews / document review within cases on a snowball basis: following the trail of research utilization:
      - in other organizational units;
      - of other knowledge than intended;
      - in unforeseen ways; and
      - in new relationship development
    - Cross-case analysis focussed on extent of and conditions for achievement of intended program outcomes
  - Many unanticipated forms and sites of knowledge uptake
  - Also some cold trails: no evidence of utilization
Approach 3: Head deeper into the woods

- Evaluation of knowledge mobilization often stops (sometimes because of time and resource constraints) at a first, immediate level of utilization
  - There may be indirect and accretive utilization in the longer term
- Example 4: Evaluation of large scale research grants in social sciences and humanities
Example 3

- **Multiple-case study**
  - 8 cases, selected to maximize disciplinary diversity
    - Interviews / document review within cases on a snowball basis: following the trail of research utilization in other organizations from one research user to another
    - Cross-case analysis focussed on the range (breadth, diversity) of uptake, and where possible to document impacts on programs, policies or services
    - Many instances of uptake found that research producers had not identified
    - Instances also found of non-linkage, foundereded relationships.
Conclusion

- Approaches for systematically looking for accretive, non-linear, unpredictable knowledge and non-utilization
  - Approach 1: Expand the notion of “knowledge”
  - Approach 2: Study the producer/user relationships in context, not the knowledge
  - Approach 3: Deepen data collection beyond the immediate level of knowledge uptake
References
