



# A Creative Approach to the Development of an Agenda for Knowledge Utilization: Outputs from the 11th International Knowledge Utilization Colloquium (KU 11)

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## ABSTRACT

A group of researchers and practitioners interested in advancing knowledge utilization met as a colloquium in Belfast (KU 11) and used a “world café” approach to exploit the social capital and shared understanding built up over previous events to consider the research and practice agenda. We considered three key areas of relevance to knowledge use: (1) understanding the nature of research use, influence and impact; (2) blended and collaborative approaches to knowledge production and use; and (3) supporting sustainability and spread of evidence-informed innovations.

The approach enabled the development of artifacts that reflected the three areas and these were analyzed using a creative hermeneutic approach.

The themes that emerged and which are outlined in this commentary are not mutually exclusive. There was much overlap in the discussions and therefore of the themes, reflecting the complex nature of knowledge translation work. The agenda that has emerged from KU 11 also reflects the participatory and creative approach in which the meeting was structured and focused, and therefore emphasizes the processual, relational and contingent nature of some of the challenges we face.

The past 20 years has seen an explosion in activity around understanding KU, and we have learned much about the difficulties. Whilst the agenda for the next decade may be becoming clearer, colloquia such as KU 11, using creative and engaging approaches, have a key role to play in dissecting, articulating and sharing that agenda. In this way, we also build an ever-expanding international community that is dedicated to working towards increasing the chances of success for better patient care.

**KEYWORDS** knowledge utilisation, knowledge translation, research utilisation

Around the globe, there has been increasing attention placed on how the use of evidence in practice can lead to better outcomes for patients. Despite this attention, the gap between what we (think) know from evidence and

what is practiced often remains wide. Since 2000, the international KU colloquia have met annually to explore the challenges of knowledge utilization in health care (<http://www.kusp.ualberta.ca/en/KnowledgeUtilizationColloquia>).

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aspx) to better understand why these gaps persist and what could be done to reduce them. The group is a multidisciplinary community of approximately 80 participants from nursing, midwifery, medicine and the allied health professions, as well as social scientists of various persuasions. Over time, a degree of continuity of attendance (balanced between experienced and early career researchers, including doctoral students) has allowed the building of some sophisticated conversations. In the most recent meeting (June 2011, Belfast, United Kingdom) an adapted version of the “world café” (<http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>) approach was used to exploit the social capital and shared understanding built up over previous events to consider the research and practice agenda around three key areas of relevance to knowledge use: (1) understanding the nature of research use, influence and impact; (2) blended and collaborative approaches to knowledge production and use; and (3) supporting sustainability and spread of evidence-informed innovations.

A world café approaches “knowledge construction” through extended dialogue across mixed and shifting groups. These discussions are aided by encouragement to use creative materials (e.g., colored pens, ample supplies of paper, paints, and other craft materials) so that creativity of thinking, expression, and communication are enhanced. Thus, as discussions proceed, data are accumulated in the form of key phrases, sketched ideas, drawings, paintings and models (literal and figurative). These data sources form the basis of further analysis that teases out the insights and conclusions from the shared discussions. The three themes were debated in separate but interlinked sessions, and produced a dataset of “creative outputs.”

These data were analyzed by a smaller group of KU participants using a creative critical hermeneutic approach (Boomer & McCormack 2010), involving five steps: (1) they each individually reviewed the relevant dataset, noting their thoughts, feelings and responses to these stimuli; (2) in a creative process, each individual created an artifact that began to capture some of their responses to the dataset reviewed (these might, for example, be drawings, paintings, models or poems); (3) working in pairs, individuals took it in turns to explain to their partner their thinking behind their creative artifacts, while the partner took notes of the themes emerging from the account they were hearing; (4) using these themes, individuals then circulated around all the newly created artifacts to add “Post-it Notes” labeling the themes wherever they could be seen on any of the creative pieces; (5) finally, collective discussion across the group pulled out the key repetitive themes that had emerged as most salient. This commentary reports

on the findings from this process for the three themes in turn.

## RESEARCH USE, INFLUENCE, AND IMPACT

The original working brief for this discussion was to address the following:

How can research contribute to knowledge, and perhaps “make a difference”? What kinds of knowledge use, influence and impact should we be looking for?

From the analytic process described above it was clear that seven themes had emerged, which are reported here.

- (1) **Research use as concrete change and discernible direct impact.** In health care, doing the right things, to the right patients, at the right time remains a direct and at times challenging goal. Therefore, of clear importance in understanding research use is identifying concrete service change, demonstrable behavior change and clearly different patterns of care as a direct and attributable result of the application of evidence.
- (2) **Research use and softer influence.** As important as concrete change undoubtedly is, research is also seen to influence in softer, more nuanced ways: by changing the shape of debates; shifting conceptual categorizations and mental models; and even by challenging and reforming personal and professional values. Such “enlightenment” uses of research (Weiss 1979), and research’s capacity to enable different sorts of conversations across stakeholders than hitherto, were seen as important, but harder to conceptualize, track, measure or attribute.
- (3) **Research as mediator of relationships, collaborations, and partnerships.** Getting things done involves working together, and one key role of research is to bring together diverse parties. Sharing research has a role in enabling and mediating conversations, sometimes promoting shared understanding, and sometimes helping to delineate the areas of contestation. Thus the use, influence and impact of research are seen more in the processes of engagement rather than being linked directly to service outcomes.
- (4) **Research and risk modulation.** One definition of knowledge centers on its capacity to inform action, and all actions engender some kind of risk (was it the right action? will it work or fail?). A key “use” for research then is its capacity to reduce uncertainty and help in the management of risk. As such, good research can potentiate more effective action through modulating risk and placing shared boundaries around conceptions of risk.

- (5) **Research, knowledge, and power.** The coconstitution of knowledge and power (from knowledge comes power, but knowledge is what the powerful assert it to be) is almost a truism. Yet recognizing that research (and its communication, application and use) bolsters as well as challenges power dynamics remains important to a full understanding of how research impacts. Power dynamics affected may be those seen in service and policy settings, as well as those involved in the relations between researchers and potential research users.
- (6) **The path dependency of research influence.** Research “use” emerges from a complex, protracted and socially situated process, and both process impacts and subsequent application are strongly influenced by that journey. Problem selection, conceptual framings, methods choice, language of expression, partnership arrangements, communications strategies and so on, are all shapers of what emerges and how it might be applied, ignored or coopted.
- (7) **Research use happens in the context of diverse capacities.** Related to the notion of path dependency (above), whether and how research is used, influences or impacts depends crucially on diverse and overlapping capacities. Local capacities to do research (in all its hues), capacities to form partnerships that span knowledge production, coproduction and use, and the absorptive capacity of health systems for new knowledge, are all key components to be understood before we can make judgments on the use and application of research.

These seven emergent themes illustrate the varied, rich and nuanced conversations possible from a world café approach, and point to both operational challenges and opportunities for deeper study. As more and more public bodies (including funders) awaken to the idea that not all research has intrinsic value, and that much of even seemingly applied research fails to get applied, we can expect ever more demands for accountability for impact. The agenda sketched out here suggests the complexity of the task—and hints at some of the inherent tensions in making judgments about research use and impact.

### **BLENDED AND COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION**

For this theme the discussions centered on the meta-question: What are blended and collaborative approaches to knowledge translation (KT) and why are they needed?

The themes that emerged from the analysis of outputs from the discussion are outlined below:

- (1) **Opacity:** as yet, it seems that there is some ambiguity about the meanings of blended and collaborative approaches to KT which leads to a lack of clarity when these words are used without ensuring shared meaning and understanding—an important foundation for collaborative approaches to working for KT. Blending and collaborative could be seen as separate concepts, with “blended” relating to paradigms for studying or undertaking KT, and “collaborative” more likely to be used to describe many activities already taking place in KT. There was recognition that another aspect of opacity is the messiness or cloudiness of “what goes on” in KT, which require clearer explication to facilitate understanding for all involved.
- (2) **Evolution:** blended and collaborative processes for researching and undertaking KT activities were recognized as a new area of investigation. These require an ability from researchers and practitioners to have a “light grasp” on the ways things are done, allowing blended and collaborative approaches to “unfold over time,” to remain dynamic and questioning. This poses many challenges for researchers and practitioners as they attempt to embrace blended and collaborative approaches to KU: such approaches demand changes to research training and graduate education to support team building, negotiation and networking skills.
- (3) **Elemental differences:** part of the opacity involved in blended and collaborative approaches to KT were fundamental differences—between blended and collaborative as concepts; those of the two different communities of practice and research; of “two worlds” trying to achieve something together and which are, largely, closed systems. Some observations from participants alluded to these differences: blended is about methods, collaboration is about people; blended and collaborative are different types of processes/concepts with different tasks, activities and endpoints. These differences were seen as important to acknowledge when trying to achieve KT rather than pretending that they do not exist. It was viewed as more important to work within the recognition that there are differences and work with these to achieve shared goals as the next theme further unpicked.
- (4) **Shared meaning:** the names that we give to what we do in KT were seen as important, but not as important as ensuring that those involved have shared

meaning and understanding of the purpose and action in any KT endeavor. The need to work from common ground to achieve goals was acknowledged as of considerable importance and to ensure that no group's or individual's goal was given precedence over another. Developing or agreeing shared meaning was seen as one way of achieving this and by acknowledging that each collaborator's contribution is of equal value and importance; the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Despite these recognitions and acknowledgements, there was agreement that shared meaning is not necessarily achieved.

- (5) **Physical and Emotional Work:** the third theme is the "what goes on" in collaborative and blended approaches to KT. The "physical" was seen as acknowledging that these approaches to KT are not easy; they are demanding and hard work. Inherent in these approaches were issues and concerns about potential or actual conflict, unequal partnerships and concerns about whether these approaches could ever work regardless of the effort involved and the desire to make them work. The "emotional" aspects of the theme were captured in observations such as need for trust; often a case of heart versus mind; depends on values and ethics; and needs sensitive researchers. This theme seemed to acknowledge and illustrate the effort required to make collaborative and blended approaches a reality and the many uncertainties that exist in doing so.
- (6) **Linkages:** this emerged as a strong theme with many references to bridges, bridging, crossing/spanning boundaries, or reaching out to other communities, be they researchers or practitioners. Discussions revealed associated notions of linkages that were strong and flexible, rather than focusing on weak links in chains, for example. Beyond the abstract images of bridges spanning great chasms between research and practice, there was also an acknowledgement that KT can look to other areas to link methods and transfer knowledge gained, such as associated work around quality improvement, which shares much common ground.
- (7) **Patient centeredness:** while much of the discussion focused on blended and collaborative approaches to KT, there was also a significant amount of discussion throughout the colloquium about collaborations with patients. It was viewed by participants as being at the heart of what we do, whether from a research or practice or collaborative perspective. However, there was acknowledgement that it was not necessarily easy to achieve and in particular, there were challenges in trying to engage patients as partners

in KT work and in achieving successful partnerships of equals: Patient centeredness is the heart of everything we do in KT but do patients want to be partners with us, or do they want us to "get on with the job"?

These tensions illustrate the somewhat inchoate nature of current thinking around blended and collaborative approaches. There is therefore a need for more definitional work, and perhaps new terminology too, that will draw out and distinguish the distinctions and linkages as we think through blended and collaborative KT.

## SUSTAINABILITY AND SPREAD

The meta-question that participants considered in this theme was: What do we mean by spread and sustainability, and how can they be supported, and evaluated in KT activity. The analysis process resulted in five main themes.

- (1) **Spread and sustainability as related, but different concepts, both lacking clarity.** Whilst at face value the words spread and sustainability have clear meanings, when considering their meaning to implementation and KT there is less clarity. A number of questions exist including: whether spread and sustainability are on a continuum of implementation rather than being discrete concepts; whether spread is an ever increasing circle of inclusion; if spread is a precursor to sustainability; whether it is the physical boundary of an impact (i.e., occurring across a number of units/services/teams) that determines spread and the degree of it being embedded that defines sustainability; and whether sustainability is a function of time, and if so what length of time. Crucially, the lack of clarity about what we mean by spread and sustainability impacts on our ability to plan, implement and evaluate implementation efforts.
- (2) **Characteristics of spread and sustainability.** Whilst there was a lack of conceptual clarity about spread and sustainability, a number of characteristics surfaced. Just as the path dependency of research influence has been described as a socially situated and complex process, perhaps unsurprisingly spread and sustainability is perceived to have corresponding challenges. Frequently described as organic, nonlinear and messy, spread and sustainability is difficult to achieve and a function of the interaction of many factors including the evidence, the context, leadership, the participants and the resources invested in the implementation effort. Plans for spread and sustainability therefore need to account for a multitude of contributory factors and have the flexibility to

respond to the unanticipated consequences of implementation processes.

- (3) **Spread and sustainability of what?** Typically both spread and sustainability are perceived as desirable outcomes—something that we strive for as markers of success. However this assumes there is clarity about what it is we want to spread and sustain: what the essence is of the practice/behavior we seek to spread and sustain and how this will manifest over time and boundaries, particularly as ideas and practices reconfigure and metamorphose. Often this clarity does not exist, and in reality it may not be desirable or appropriate to spread and sustain all elements, or aspects of an intervention and related impacts. Critical questions about why and what should be spread and sustained need to be asked early on in implementation activities and processes.
- (4) **Whose responsibility is spread and sustainability?** The responsibility for spread and sustainability was perceived to be an ethical as well as a practical dilemma. Research driven implementation projects are often “one-off” events that may not include intent to actively spread and sustain as part of the project leaving those “left behind” to manage these processes. Giving priority to incorporating mechanisms for spread and sustainability within project designs (e.g., interventions that build capability and capacity within implementation contexts) and appropriately funding those (i.e., incentivizing) may go some way to resolving issues of responsibility. Alternatively, achieving spread and sustainability could be facilitated through alternative frameworks and paradigms of knowledge production and use.
- (5) **Coproduction as an approach to spread and sustainability.** Spread and sustainability may be a function of collaboration, engagement and partnership between the producers and potential users of knowledge. Whilst a theory that still needs to be tested it has intuitive appeal. If the view that evidence use is a social and contextually contingent is accepted, bringing parties together to codesign, communicate, jointly problem solve and develop situated knowledge and practices may ultimately mean these are more likely to be sustained (because they have been appropriately designed for the people and context) and potentially spread (because they have been developed through social processes and networks).

As with the previous two meta-themes, discussions around sustainability and spread highlighted tensions, paradoxes and a fluidity of terminology that resisted consensual definition (at least at this stage of development). While sometimes this fluidity accurately reflected the emergent nature of the phenomena, it also raised many questions for which some definitional clarity is desirable—not least to inform more careful and sustained empirical work in this area.

## SUMMARY

Similar to Melnyk et al. (2004) who outlined an agenda from a U.S.-based summit on evidence-based practice, we have described the main issues to emerge from an international knowledge colloquium, which serve to complement their recommendations. The themes outlined in this commentary are not mutually exclusive. There was much overlap in the discussions and therefore of the themes, reflecting the complex nature of KT work. The agenda that has emerged from KU 11 also reflects the participatory and creative approach in which the meeting was structured and focused, and therefore emphasizes the processual, relational and contingent nature of some of the challenges we face.

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