

Practice Based Learning for Better Health

Notes

- This document consists of excerpts from the document *Practice Based Learning Project: A Proposal*, prepared for the Canadian Best Practices Initiative (CBPI) Group by Barbara Kahan and Rishia Burke, September 2008.
- We acknowledge the generous assistance of the following people in the development of the document *Practice Based Learning Project*: Nina Jetha; Kerry Robinson; Reg Warren.
- These excerpts are made available with the permission of the CBPI and Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).
- The content of these excerpts does not necessarily reflect the views of the CBPI or PHAC.

Contents

Highlights	1
Practice Based Learning Overview	2
Practice Based Learning Hypothetical Scenario.....	4
Appendices	9

Practice Based Learning for Better Health

HIGHLIGHTS

- Practice based learning focuses on the part of the practice cycle where program implementers and community members identify, share and apply learnings from local and other circumstances.
- Both research and ongoing reflection are integral to the identification of practice based learnings. Evaluation alone is insufficient to achieve the full benefits of practice based learning.
- Examples of reflection activities include regular organizational reflection sessions, practice networks, and learning circles.
- Examples of research activities include process and outcome evaluations, literature reviews, needs/capacities assessments, environmental scans, and priority population consultations.

PRACTICE BASED LEARNING OVERVIEW

Program implementers are often thought to have little role in knowledge development, except as consumers of knowledge generated by academic or professional researchers. However, there is growing recognition that program implementers, as well as members of the priority populations that they work with, have a great deal to contribute to knowledge development in a number of different ways.

The “practice based learning” that results from knowledge creation processes and activities at this “on the ground” level has three key benefits:

- significant addition to the knowledge base
- high degree of relevance to the practice context and therefore highly usable
- improved practice and outcomes

The concept of “practice based learning” as used in this document focuses on the part of the practice cycle where program implementers and community members identify, share and apply learnings from local and other circumstances. The identification of practice based learning results from:

- research (for example, evaluation, needs/capacity assessments, environmental scans, literature reviews)
- ongoing reflection (ongoing individual or collective review of practice activities and processes in relation to values, theories/beliefs, evidence, understanding of the environment, and results)

Evaluation’s contributions to on-the-ground learnings are more widely acknowledged than the contributions of ongoing reflection. However, practice based learning requires ongoing reflection as well as evaluation (and other kinds of research) to identify learnings because ongoing reflection is key to identifying:

- how to best use research results to ensure improved processes, activities and outcomes; reflection encourages an understanding of the full range of implications and consequences for any proposed change
- how to best integrate into decision making other practice influences such as values, theories/beliefs, and context, again with a view to improving processes, activities and outcomes
- ideas and questions to explore through research
- insights that a more formal research process might overlook

Learnings from evaluation and other kinds of research, although extremely important, are insufficient to achieve the full benefits of practice based learning for a number of reasons. For example:

- Evaluation can cover only a small number of questions related to practice at any one time whereas reflective practitioners continually ask and answer numerous questions regarding a wide variety topics.

- Evaluation results take a while to emerge, generally at least a couple of months and often longer. Reflection learnings are much more immediate. Waiting for evaluation findings results in a more static, less responsive practice.
- Although an evaluation ideally provides reflection opportunities for evaluation participants, and reflection material through its results and recommendations, frequently reflection learnings direct evaluation and other research.
- In addition, “practitioner driven inquiries tend to be totally distinct from research/administrative evaluations. The former tend to focus upon the needs/learnings/information requirements of practitioners, while the latter tend to focus upon research and/or accountability requirements. The key distinction relates to what questions are asked and whose information needs are being addressed.” (Warren, 2008) (*Note: practitioners in this instance refer to program implementers; see Terminology section.*)

As mentioned initially, practice based learning involves more than identification of learnings, whether through research or reflection. It also involves the application and sharing of learnings. To provide a more concrete sense of what practice based learning involves, a hypothetical practice based learning scenario is described below.

PRACTICE BASED LEARNING HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

Home Base is a community based organization whose mandate is supporting positive early childhood development. Located in a low-income neighbourhood in a medium-sized city, it started out as a parent/child drop-in centre which also offered parenting classes. Several years later it now also provides a family support component to help families access appropriate community resources regarding health, education, income, housing and social networks. This change was implemented as a result of learnings which emerged from a combination of reflection and research. Currently under discussion is the possibility of a community building initiative. This idea was conceived through reflection, and Home Base staff have started doing some research to identify the experiences and results of other organizations who have used a community building approach.

More details of Home Base's practice based learning experiences are outlined below. Learnings from reflection and research activities are both described.

Reflection Activities and Learnings

A description of Home Base's reflection activities and the resulting learnings follows.

organizational reflection sessions

At monthly Friday afternoon sessions, staff review the past month, e.g. what has worked particularly well and ideas for making things work even better. They also discuss different reflection topics, e.g.: why are they doing what they do; what key strengths are available for them to work on; how well their practice reflects their values and how to increase consistency between values and practice; has their vision changed over time and if it has what are the practice implications. Examples of resulting insights/learnings follow:

- Staff observed, based on their experience, that parents and children appear to do better in a number of different ways when they are in better quality housing in safe neighbourhoods; they also discussed how housing and income was often closely linked. These insights contributed to staff researching the broader socio-economic influences on parenting and early childhood development, through consulting with a couple of university professors and reading some of the literature. Brainstorming their findings led to the introduction of family support workers with a determinants of health focus.
- While discussing values, staff realized that their value of inclusion was not as fully integrated into their practice as it could be. As a result of this insight, parents are now on Home Base's board of directors.
- When talking about the recent evaluation results, staff realized they had no formal follow-up plan to the evaluation and that in the past evaluation reports were filed without having any impact on their practice. This time they decided to form a follow-up committee to think about the results and come up with a plan for integrating the evaluation learnings into their practice in ways that make the most sense and will most likely improve processes, activities and outcomes.

- At one session a staff member shared her frustration around working on a family by family basis. Although she could see some successes, she thought a more collective approach might result in more widespread and longer lasting benefits. The ensuing discussion brought up the possibility of adding a community building component to Home Base's work. This idea will be pursued.

practice network meetings

A couple of years ago people working in the area of early childhood development established a network. The network meets bi-monthly to share information about topics such as recent activities and results, what new resources members have discovered, and solutions they have found to challenges they have faced. Two examples of resulting insights/learnings follow:

- At a recent meeting one member talked about the beliefs outlined in a new child development curriculum her organization had adopted. During the discussion that followed it became clear that not everyone shared these beliefs, making the Home Base staff representative realize that perhaps a difference in underlying beliefs was the reason for the differences in how Home Base staff interacted with participating parents. After discussing this question at a Home Base reflection session, it appeared that some staff believed that parents had a great deal of wisdom while other staff thought that parents exhibited such poor judgement that they could not have much wisdom. Follow-up discussions are planned to address this difference in beliefs, which staff agreed was fundamental as it impacted on how they worked with parents.
- At another meeting, a network member described how his organization had used an Appreciative Inquiry method for a recent evaluation. After hearing a summary of what had worked well and what hadn't, members agreed that it was an evaluation approach worth trying, with some adaptations to make it work well in their particular contexts.

learning circle get togethers

The learning circle includes, in addition to a couple of Home Base staff, staff from three other organizations, three academic researchers in the area of early childhood development, and five low-income parents with young children. Examples of resulting insights/learnings follow:

- Home Base staff learned from parents that families are more comfortable working with people who come from a similar background to theirs as they understand more deeply what they are experiencing and also they speak a more similar language. Home Base staff will bring up the idea at the next reflection session of hiring peer family support workers when positions open up.
- Home Base staff discovered that one of the academic researchers is willing to sit on their evaluation committee and help design their next outcome evaluation.
- The academic researchers received ideas from parents and staff about the interpretation of the results of one of their recent research projects that had not occurred to them.

Research Activities and Learnings

A description of Home Base's research activities and the resulting learnings follows.

literature review

Regarding a literature review on the determinants of health and early childhood development, staff received some references from an academic researcher they know at the local university, some from a listserv they are part of, some from other members of their practice network, and some from an internet search they conducted themselves.

Two examples of resulting insights/learnings follow:

- Results of the literature review they conducted confirmed their reflection insights that social determinants of health such as income and housing do have a major impact on early childhood development.
- An unexpected insight was that they could benefit from increasing their internet search skills and knowledge. They have decided to request a workshop on this topic.

process evaluation

A decision was made regarding the most recent process evaluation to continue to collect quantitative information, for example on how many families were participating in Home Base and how many contacts family support workers had with families, but also to go beyond the numbers to discuss the quality of basic processes such as decision making and resource management. Two examples of resulting insights/learnings follow:

- Process evaluation results indicate that the communication methods Home Base staff have refined over the years to ensure everyone is kept up to date on what is happening have worked even better than they expected and that it should be continued. They will share these results at the next practice network meeting.
- Results indicate that more effort needs to be directed to relationship building with people in external organizations. Relationships within the organization seem healthy, especially since the institution of regular reflection sessions, but relationships with some other organizations' workers, e.g. welfare workers, is a bit rocky.

outcome evaluation

A preliminary outcome evaluation was recently conducted specifically to look at whether increasing the quality of housing made a difference to parenting. An example of resulting insights/learnings follows:

- Preliminary outcome evaluation results support the Home Base staff's theory that there is a relationship between housing and parenting, for example in the amount of time spent telling stories or reading to children. As a result they will continue with their determinants of health approach, and plan for a broader and more thorough evaluation outcome in a couple of years.

environmental scan

At one reflection session staff realized that although they had some sense of what was going on in their community, they needed to know more if they were to make sound decisions for future plans. As a result they collected statistics on the demographics of families in their neighbourhood, gathered basic information about services provided by relevant neighbourhood agencies, and held discussions with a wide variety of groups (e.g. participating parents, neighbourhood residents, other agency workers, government personnel) to identify key assets and challenges. An example of a resulting insight/learning follows:

- There is a high mobility rate among families with young children. The next scheduled reflection session will discuss this and other results and what to do about them.

priority population consultations

Home Base has conducted satisfaction surveys with participating parents from the beginning. Lately however they have instituted a yearly consultation which includes participating parents and parents in the neighbourhood who are not Home Base participants. The consultation takes the form of focus groups and a survey. An example of a resulting insight/learning follows:

- One finding was that transportation was a challenge which prevents the participation of some families in Home Base programs. Staff are now investigating the possibilities of getting a van to provide rides to and from Home Base. They are also discussing the possibility of outreach activities, where family support workers would visit families in their homes.

Added Value of Reflection

The Home Base scenario described above illustrates the value of including in practice reflection in addition to evaluation and other research. For example:

- If staff had not observed that families do better in higher quality housing, they would not have researched this topic and would not have changed their practice correspondingly. An evaluation would not have resulted in this change unless it included a question about the connection between housing quality and family outcomes a program that focused on drop-in activities and parenting classes is unlikely to have asked this question. Even if asked a general question about what might help get better results, staff unused to ongoing reflection may not have come up with the observation about the housing link. Home Base's reflection sessions being held on a relatively frequent and regular basis encouraged staff to strengthen their reflection muscles and come up with more insights.
- Recognizing that their practice was inconsistent with their value of inclusion would not have come up in a traditional evaluation. The same is true about the issue of conflicting beliefs that came up in the practice network meeting. (These insights however may have emerged in the rare atypical evaluation which examined topics such as the relationship to practice of values and beliefs.)

- Follow up is not usually incorporated into the evaluation process. Home Base's reflection sessions provide a perfect opportunity to redress this situation.
- The idea of adopting/adapting Appreciative Inquiry evaluation methods would not have come up in an evaluation unless the evaluation specifically asked about other evaluation approaches to use. Although this is an unlikely evaluation question, a few organizations (probably not very many) might ask this question as a non-evaluation research question.
- The learning circle insight about parents being more comfortable with peer workers is very unlikely to have come up in an evaluation, again unless it was specifically asked which it likely would not be – unless someone had a reflection insight about it and identified it as a possible evaluation question.
- The environmental scan would not have taken place without Home Base staff's reflection insight that they needed to know more about their community.

APPENDICES

Appendix I: References

- Butterfish, FD., Francisco, V, Capwell, EM. *Stakeholder Participation in Evaluation*. Health Promotion Practice 2(2), 114-119 (2001).
- Dubois, N., Jetha, N., Robinson, K., Szuto, I., Wan, G., and Wilkerson, T. *Canadian Best Practices Initiative Methodology Background Paper*. August 2008
- Kahan, B. *Review of Evaluation Frameworks*. Prepared for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, March 2008.
- Kahan, B, Goodstadt, M. *The IDM Manual*. (Sections on: Basics, Suggested Guidelines, Evidence Framework, Research and Evaluation, Using the IDM Framework.) Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto, May 2005 (3rd edition).
- Warren, Reg. Email communication. September 9, 2008.
- Van Marris, B., King, B. *Evaluating Health Promotion Programs Version 3.6*. The Health Communication Unit, Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto, 2007.

Appendix II: Key Underlying Assumptions

- Best practices occur when practice (processes and activities) is consistent with decision making fundamentals such as values, goals, ethics, theories/beliefs, evidence, and understanding of the environment (Kahan & Goodstadt 2005). Best practices result in improved outcomes.
- Academic/professional researchers, policy makers, program implementers (managers and front-line workers), and members of the priority population are all experts in their own areas, with valuable expertise to contribute. Traditionally the expertise of program implementers and members of the priority population has been overlooked; it is important to redress this situation. Mutual learning between all groups, and integration of these learnings into practice (including research), is key for improved practice and outcomes.
- Taking a comprehensive systems approach will in the long-term provide the best positive results for improved practice and outcomes. This means looking at practice based learning in the context of the practice cycle.
- Building a culture which supports practice based learning in concrete as well as intangible ways is necessary to reap the full benefits of practice based learning.

Appendix III: Key Terminology

- **Practice** includes processes and activities related to:
 - addressing the selected health/social issues
 - addressing organizational issues
 - conducting research (including evaluation)

- The **practice cycle** (see diagram below) includes the following overlapping steps:
 - Plan for start-up, implementation and evaluation/research based on: knowledge of local circumstances (e.g. demographics, values, resources, politics, results of local research); knowledge from other circumstances (e.g. research results).
 - Implement.
 - Research and reflect to generate learnings.
 - Follow up on research/reflection results to ensure learnings are integrated into practice.
 - Revise processes and activities to reflect learnings from local circumstances; adapt relevant learnings from other circumstances and apply to practice.
 - Evaluate/reflect on revised and adapted processes and activities.
 - Share learnings with other people, e.g. through Practice Research Networks, Communities of Practice (learning circles), databases, journals, conferences, listservs.
 - Continue practice cycle: plan; implement; research/reflect; apply learnings through revision and adaptation; share learnings.
- **Practitioners** include program implementers (managers and front-line workers), policy makers, and academic/professional researchers.
- **Priority population members** are the people most directly affected by the conditions which a program or initiative is designed to address.
- **Evaluation** is one kind of research. Typical evaluations focus on descriptions and numbers of program participants and services, quality of services, how closely actual service delivery matches intended service delivery, program results and whether program objectives are being met (Van Marris and King 2007). Ideally, evaluations would also, but don't always consider:
 - processes (e.g. communication, decision making, resource management, relationship building), activities and outcomes, and the links between them
 - degree of consistency between practice and decision making fundamentals such as evidence, values, theories/beliefs (e.g. how change occurs, what influences the selected issue, what constitutes evidence), and environmental considerations (e.g. strengths, challenges, demographics, culture)
 - ways to improve practice and outcomes

Examples of different evaluation approaches include goals based, goals free, theory based, utilization focused, and collaborative. Some approaches can be combined. For example, utilization focused and collaborative approaches could be either goals based or goals free (Kahan 2008). A collaborative approach is most relevant to practice based learning.

Butterfish et al. (2001) list three variables in a collaborative approach: who controls the evaluation process, who participates, and to what extent they participate. Potential collaborators include academic/professional researchers, program implementers, and members of the priority population. For each variable a range of possibilities exists. For example, academic/professional researchers may be totally excluded from the evaluation process or be involved in all aspects, program implementers may control key evaluation decisions but not conduct the evaluation, members of the priority population may be involved in all aspects of controlling and conducting the evaluation or only some.

- **Research** includes evaluation. Examples of non-evaluation research are prevalence studies and environmental scans. The nature of research varies according to factors such as who is conducting it, the underlying approach, and available resources.
- **Reflection** involves ongoing individual or collective review of practice (activities, processes) in relation to values, theories/beliefs, evidence, understanding of the environment, and results. Reflection ensures that research findings are used in the best way possible and captures insights that research might overlook.

Research (including evaluation) is more systematic, in-depth and rigorous than reflection, and can be used to explore reflection insights. In addition, research results are documented. Reflection is more informal and its results may or may not be documented. However, documenting reflection results is important so that they can be shared. Both research and reflection are important to the practice cycle and are complementary.

- **Evidence** is information used to make decisions. The best evidence is:
 - high quality (e.g. based on accurate data and generated by rigorous methods)
 - comprehensive (e.g. based on qualitative and quantitative information from all key stakeholders and from local and external circumstances; includes the relationship between processes, activities and results/outcomes; includes information supporting or contradicting both mainstream and innovative ideas)
 - relevant (e.g. generated by the research design and methods most appropriate to the issue; generated by methods that reflect health promotion/public health values, theories, beliefs, and understanding of the environment; takes into account local circumstances)
- **Practice based learning** refers to increased understanding as the result of (a) research and (b) ongoing reflection. Practice based learning is part of the practice cycle, and includes sharing and applying learnings from local and other circumstances.
- The **practice based learning cycle** exists in the broader practice cycle. Research is one part of the practice based learning cycle. Evaluation research generates learnings around processes, activities and outcomes, and other kinds of research generate learnings on other aspects important to practice such as characteristics of the priority population and prevalence of the selected issue. These research learnings are then integrated into decision-making related to planning and other practice activities and processes.

Ongoing reflection is another part of the practice based learning cycle and complements research. Ongoing reflection ensures that program implementers and members of the priority population consider how to best use research findings to improve processes and activities, resulting in better short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes. Reflection also ensures that decision making takes into account key practice influences such as understanding of the environment and values. (For example: What impact does the environment have on the program? Are program processes and activities consistent with stated values?) In addition, reflection provides ideas and questions that can be explored through research, and insights that a more formal evaluation process might overlook.

A third part of the practice based learning cycle, closely connected to identification and application of learnings, is sharing learnings with others.

Appendix IV: Practice Cycle Diagram

