

Metaphors, Biases & Learning Partnerships: 10 Ways to Promote Effective Knowledge Mobilization

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By Christopher Wilson, Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa

Summary

Knowledge exchange is more than just a compilation or warehousing of data or information. To generate new knowledge we must infuse data with new meaning. We do this not in an additive way from single actions and data-bits, but by creating a story about the overall pattern embedded in events and data and then using that story to understand more clearly the events and data that gave rise to it.

For us to even notice new information and perceive its importance, it must be relevant to an option for the future that we have already worked out in our imaginations -- what de Geus calls “memories of the future”. Once again this is practically accomplished through the use of stories, metaphors, and cultural narratives. So when it comes to creating innovative, evidence-based health and social policy, we rely less on objective evidence and, according to Schon, more on the ways in which we frame the purposes to be achieved, embedded in the metaphors we use, than a selection from objective, optimal means for achieving them. This is how we give meaning to evidence. Thus, if we wish to transform policy we must first generate new ‘memories of the future’; we must transform our organizing metaphors and then as research shows, we inevitably change the collective decisions and actions that follow from them.

Given increased knowledge specialization has created ever narrower knowledge silos, we find ourselves in the position of the six blind men describing the elephant. We come to partially valid conclusions, due to metaphors that lack comprehensiveness and incomplete data. We need to seek that reality where valid, competing frames can be true simultaneously. To achieve this we need more conversations.

This implies that effective knowledge exchange must go beyond simply aggregating information but must create conversational opportunities where we can co-construct ‘mashups’ of different metaphors and organizing assumptions. We need opportunities to put together competing views, as the Carter Racing/NASA case revealed, to mitigate against the learning biases that we all hold.

We must also recognize that innovation is part of a cyclical process of cultural evolution: sometimes integrating innovation into our collective assumptions about the world, and sometimes diffusing those assumptions to enable local innovation. In both cases there is a case for a public good in facilitating knowledge transfer between society and knowledge institutions, sector networks, and single organizations.

Online systems can be very useful in this regard, if there sufficient shared ownership in the goals of the web-based tools. In addition, I suggest that those tools not be limited to providing only knowledge content but that they also provide collaboration-support information that reinforces the shared commitments of contributors and users and mitigates against free-riding.

Lastly, I suggest *10 Ways to Promote Effective Knowledge Mobilization* online:

1. Use active and engaging practices to promote user ownership and contribution
2. Provide regular interaction between stakeholders
3. Establish the principles by which partners agree to work together
4. Construct different strategies for formal and tacit knowledge.
5. Use effective ‘champions’
6. Keep participation in the community of practice open, inclusive, and responsive
7. Website design, content collection and dissemination should generate a sense of belonging
8. Pay attention to the evolution of the partnership
9. Create space for partner awareness
10. Provide written or oral summaries of research for practitioners