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Higher Education Close Up 7

## Use and usability of research and making a difference

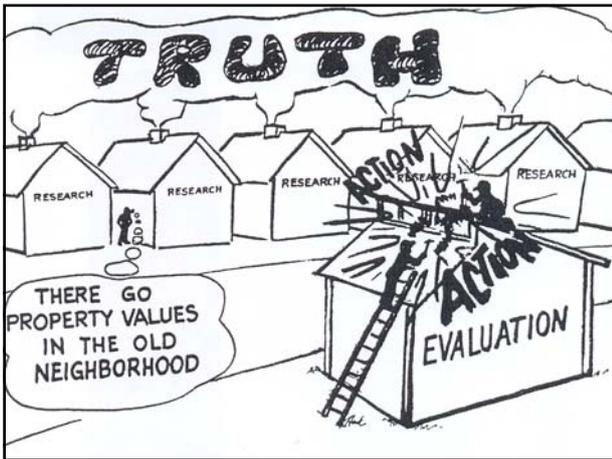
Murray Saunders  
HERE

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### Personal connections

- An involvement in evaluative research for most of my career explains why this issue has preoccupied me for a long time. Michael Patton's cartoon distinction.....
- CSET and the research project that never was!
- Mainly in the fields of change processes in development environments (Higher Education, rural development, sustainable change) which have always had the aspiration of 'making a difference'
- Part of the value base involves practice associated with 'inclusive evaluative research'



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### Discussion points

- What does making a difference mean?
- A note on evaluative research
- Making a difference through the act of research
- Research use
- Research usability
- Contingent and longer term differences (the paradox of research use and change (to make difference outside the research community requires access and congruence (inherently conservative) unless driven by values which support 'change' (connect with change 'agents'))
- Towards a progressive agenda for use (value driven): research and advocacy

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### Making a difference for whom? The discursive landscape

- Effects
- Impact
- Use
- Usability
- Making a difference and the moral political imperative

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### The context of the contemporary political environment for research

Present policy hegemony frames our connection with potential users

It tends to be simplistic: a construction of causality between an item of research output and the way it might be used by others. "The chimera of certainty" Problems with the present 'construction' is embodied in the way in which research impact is understood in the current REF .

- The time scales are often unrealistic
- There is no theory of engagement (given our research is usually embodied in a text)
- There is no theory of impact or what counts as the creation of effects and on what
- There is no theory of change i.e. How might research create 'effects' on [practice
- The conservative undertow

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Why a re-emphasis on the uses and impact of research as a resource for policy learning and development?

The urge to 'sense make' in complex environments . Research *"tells us what is going on"*

Social and political imperatives (issues of transparency, resources, legitimacy and equity). Research *"contributes to public debate"* on policy

Methodological debate: difficulties and uncertainties in addressing 'end points' (attribution, causality, alignment and design). Research is meant to *"provide authoritative evidence"*

Research cost time and money. *Moving away from research as ritual, out-with society, toward research artefacts as 'use objects'?*

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What are we talking about? What forms do research artefacts take:

reports, articles, books, conference papers, executive summaries (*any others?*)

essentially

- Recommendations/analyses
- Cases of practice
- Scenarios
- Data
- Connections between variables
- Evidence of effects/impact
- Depictions of experience
- Theory building texts

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What does making a difference mean? (1)

Research community:

- > Ritual uses (knee jerk citing),
- > Paradigmatic uses (game changing ways of thinking or understanding, some of which lead to new practices) Schon's reflective practitioner, CoP theory, Becher, Bourdieu, Marton and Saljo (deep/surface), threshold concepts, etc
- > Data uses (Robbins and the untapped reservoir of young people who could go to University results in expansion, however, plate glass Universities given go ahead in 1959) Halsey, Floud, Douglas were all used.

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What does making a difference mean? (2)

Wider society: interface between research artefacts and their use to create positive change (making a difference). Must contain a theory driven concept of 'change' which refers to practice either latent (in a policy shift) or directly as a knowledge resource for a new practice.

This is the gold standard when considering 'making a difference'.....**BUT**

How do you mediate 'text' with practice?

By using a 'theory of engagement' which consists of assumptions about how to change practices

- Dissemination practices (more texts, symbols and signs: reports, articles, etc) 
- Presentational practices (like this) 
- Interactive practices (working with people to situate implications) 

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What does making a difference mean? (3)

**Instrumental:** when decision makers use research to modify a 'policy object' in some way

**Enlightenment:** when research adds knowledge to a field and thus may be used by anyone, not just those involved with government to change practice (the main emphasis of this talk)

**Persuasive or symbolic:** research is used to persuade important stakeholders that a policy, societal dimension or a programme is legitimate (often associated with a political decision that has already been made prior to the commissioning of the research)

*Adapted from Dreolin N. Fleischer and Christina A. Christie American Journal of Evaluation 2009 30: 158*

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How might we know a difference is being made: a use audit?

1. **Awareness:** knowledge but little concern or understanding of implications
2. **Informational:** awareness plus interest in knowing more about implications for policy or practice
3. **Personal:** beginning to analyse potential implications for policy and practice and impacts on planning
4. **Management:** attention on difficulties in the processes and tasks involved in developing new practices/policies on the basis of research outputs
5. **Consequence:** attention on impact on stakeholders of new practices/policies, their relevance, evaluation and implied changes derived from research outputs
6. **Collaboration:** co-ordinating and co-operating with others in using new practices or implementing policies
7. **Refocusing:** attention now on adaptation, major changes, alternatives to original ideas, creativity

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Talking of 'gold standards' of use.....

Note that the engagement with the implications of a research artefact:

- begins with simple awareness of the research report (1,2, ) and
- proceeds through examining implications (3,4),
- acting on them (5,6) and
- finally, the creative adaptation of the implication of findings in onward action (7).

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**Process use:** cognitive, behavioural, program and organizational changes resulting from engagement in the research process and learning to think evidentially

- Foregrounding new issues
- Drawing attention to 'hot spots' or problem areas
- Forcing attention on difficult areas
- Providing a 'voice' for the powerless
- Drawing attention to time-lines
- Making participants think about 'audience' and 'users'
- Policing role

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Differences in meaning and practice between use and usability of research output

- **Use** refers to considerations associated with the capacity of people within the organisational context to respond to the implications embedded in research outputs (**outward facing**)
- **Usability** refers to considerations associated with the design of the research output itself (**inward facing**)



Both dimensions are important in explaining 'high or low use environments' within social research

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Factors encouraging the **use** of research output: a case study

- The research output was connected to decision making cycles (clear knowledge on when decisions take place and who makes them)
- The output built on previous outputs: clear understanding of knowledge memory (how research might accumulate)
- The capacity of the social and political context was known:
  - Connecting to systemic processes (feeding into structures that are able to identify and act on implications)
  - Finding that organisations which are horizontal (complex adaptive systems) are better placed to respond to 'tricky' or awkward evaluations than mechanistic or bureaucratic, hierarchic organisations. Searching for activists!
  - The research had powerful gate keepers or advocates (not necessarily synonymous with conventional hierarchies)
  - The implications of the research outputs were congruent : recommendations from research built on what is already in place (the conservative undertow).

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Designing research to make a difference: **usability** in mind

An argument for inclusivity or co-construction to help usability



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### Why bother?

- Design robustness
- Evocative and authentic foci
- Legitimate and recognizable endeavour
- Creation of 'demand' and interest
- Provision of a platform for voice
- Research as a 'public good'

**The Public Goods Game**

The diagram illustrates 'The Public Goods Game'. It shows a group of five stick figures. Two are labeled 'cooperators' and three are labeled 'free-riders'. Below them, a blue arrow labeled 'contribution' points down to a blue box labeled 'Public Goods'. From this box, a blue arrow labeled 'benefits' points up to the group of figures. A large blue arrow at the bottom points from the 'Public Goods' box back to the 'Why bother?' text.

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### Practising usability in research design

**1. Discussing why the research is worth doing?**

**Key practice:** discussing and involving potential users in issues associated with why the research is taking place. This requires a frank discussion about the 'real' potential purposes even if they are to do with compliance, rhetoric, instrumentalism

**2. Discussing what might be the potential uses of the research?**

**Key practice:** rehearsing use environments in real time with real people by identifying a list of specific practices, for example:

- Tabling the report at key meetings to assess its implication
- Deciding on what those implications might be and acting on them and doing so in an agreed timeline
- Undertaking development and learning activities on the basis of the findings
- Publicising and disseminating more widely etc

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### Practising usability in research design

**3. Deciding on the Foci of the research:** activities, aspects, emphasis to be researched negotiating the research 'object'

**Key practices:** co-construction practices with key stakeholders and potential users by careful selection of relevant and salient foci

**4. Coaching in the interpretation and nature of data and evidence** [numerical, qualitative, observational, case accounts]

**Key practices:** Rendering evidence and data sets in ways that the non technical stakeholder or potential user can 'read' them, creating narratives with both qualitative and quantitative evidence

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### Practising usability in research design

**5. Sensitivity to the audience for the research output**

**Key practices:** Practices which discriminate between different audiences by style, form and content of output. Aspects of the core output (report) can be redesigned for different audiences reflecting different interests and situated use.

**6. Negotiating the timing of the release of the research output**

**Key practices:** making sure the evaluation output and deliverable deadlines coincide with other decision making cycles both formatively and summatively.

**7. Agency for undertaking the evaluation**

**Key practices:** co-construction with key stakeholders and potential users by careful selection of relevant and salient foci, potential data sources and a design for use.

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### Some discussion points: issues in attempting to make a difference

1. How far does the researcher's responsibility reach?
2. Should research be designed with use, usability and making a difference in mind?
3. Use implies the 'here and now': suggests an implicit conservatism
4. Safeguarding independent research: free in time, place and sponsor
5. Is (4) actually a legitimate 'value': should emancipatory values trump the complacency or extravagance of an academic elite i.e. research should be down and dirty to make a difference and be a public good!

