A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF KEY POINTS ON KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION FROM CURRENT LITERATURE

By Associate Professor Rhian Parker and Nathaniel Ward
Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute
ANU College of Medicine, Biology and Environment, The Australian National University

Knowledge Translation—The Basic Overview

Knowledge Translation (KT) is a process that aims at getting research knowledge into 'action'; in this sense it has what can be called an 'applied' focus, where research knowledge is translated into either decision making or practice settings. KT interventions are felt to be necessary, because traditionally there has been an underutilization of research in applied settings: that is, a 'gap' between the knowledge produced, and it's effective deployment in a 'use context'.

In this sense KT is about research utilisation, and there have been many models used to describe research utilisation processes. The earliest of these are described in terms of being either 'producer push' or 'user pull' models. Both these kinds of models assume a unidirectional flow of research knowledge into action settings. In the case of the former, the knowledge is produced by the research community with an understanding that if the knowledge was of 'good quality' end users would automatically pick it up. In the case of the former, the end users of knowledge directed the parameters of the knowledge required, and researchers were essentially contracted to produce the knowledge users thought was required.

More recently these models of research utilisation have been replaced by interaction models where both the users and producers work together in an attempt to produce the relevant research knowledge for the setting to which it is to be applied. Interaction approaches are informed by an understanding that users and producers form two distinct communities that are underpinned by different and competing values. Part of this general move to interaction approaches is informed by the idea that the 'contexts' where KT is to be applied are complex, dynamic, and subject to change. For this reason, KT interventions should be adaptable, and they should be constantly evaluated as part of the KT process to locate problematic areas in this process where knowledge flows are inhibited, which can then be redressed. Evaluations should in this way be done as part of the ongoing KT intervention, but also occur in the aftermath of the intervention to gauge its effectiveness.

The Nature and Complexity of Context and Evidence

The idea that contexts for KT are complex cuts in several directions, not the least of which involves the fact that any arena for a KT intervention needs to take into account power relations or types of interested action operative within different settings. Underpinning these are some finer grained understandings of research utilisation that make it more multi-dimensional. The three most salient of these are instrumental use (research results are applied directly to a problem); symbolic use (research is used to bolster support for a decision that has already been made); and conceptual use (research knowledge changes the way decision makers think about problems, although it is not applied to an immediate concern). All contexts are felt to have these types of utilisation simultaneously, although their ratios will vary across domains.

Because of this, understanding what counts as evidence varies across contexts. Conceptually what counts as evidence depends very much on whether it is tacit or explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is that which is gained through experience, while explicit knowledge is understood to be more like rational scientific knowledge insofar as it can be measured. The two are not mutually exclusive, rather there is interplay between the two, although there is some suggestion that KT is about making tacit knowledge explicit. This means that the interplay between evidence and context is a central problem. Whatever else evidence may be, it is not something wholly objective and is infused with wider social values and constraints that effect how or whether it will be picked up by user groups. This means that what counts as evidence may have little to do with whether it was produced through rigorous or robust research practice.

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This becomes a question of how evidence or knowledge accrues or decreases in value according to the context to which it is to be applied. Even in implementation settings where more than one interest group has a stake, it does not necessarily follow that the selected evidence will be valued equally by all parties—this is sometimes linked to things like competing interests, but equally may be linked to whether interest groups feel a sense of ownership over research outputs. This in turns means that what counts as quality evidence is not straight forward, since they are heavily inflected by subjective or qualitative judgements. Moreover, ideas of quality and value are linked to ideas of fit to use context.

Barriers and Facilitators to KT

For KT to be effective there needs to be some idea what barriers or facilitators exist within an intervention setting. Barriers are thought to inhibit knowledge flows. The potential range of barriers is almost endless; but includes things like competing interests already mentioned. They also include structural constraints (capacities for interaction and communication); cognitive constraints (the intrinsic motivations of actors); and cultural constraints (where strong professional boundaries inhibit knowledge sharing, because certain professional settings are embedded in historically evolved contexts). Facilitators on the other hand are really just the inverse of barriers. One way of thinking about this is in terms of organisational settings having certain capacities—while these capacities might act as barriers in some ways, they can also be utilised to facilitate KT. The trick is in understanding where these capacities lie and tailoring an intervention that can make best use of them in terms of knowledge uptake.

Some Strategies for KT

When developing KT strategies potential barriers need to be identified and an ongoing commitment is needed to assess blockages to knowledge flows during an intervention. The intervention can then be adapted to overcome these barriers. This is what is understood as mapping the context, firstly in the pre-intervention phase to asses where things like competing interests and values may lie, and secondly creating maps of knowledge flows during the course of an intervention.

Increasing cooperation and communication between producer and user groups is also advocated as a way of overcoming barriers to KT. The idea here is that through more interaction partnerships can be created that facilitate the flow of knowledge and can involve, among other things, producers and users jointly setting research priorities to get a better fit to context as well as produce research in a timely fashion. It is generally felt that different types of interaction between groups should occur through all phases of a KT process as an ideal.

Related to ideas of increasing interaction is the development of communities of practice, which are self organising collectives, focused on a common goal. There are a number of assumptions behind this idea; among them will be that increased senses of ownership, partnerships can be cultivated, professional skills can be developed and the rapid dissemination of information through a practice network can be achieved. Communities of practice are also thought to be a good way to utilise tacit knowledge.

The use of skilled facilitators called knowledge brokers is another strategy thought to increase research uptake. Knowledge brokers have many different roles, but their use is thought to produce fruitful interactions between users and producers. They can act as knowledge managers, linkage agents or even as capacity builders.

Finally, ideas of how research findings should be communicated are important. This is a question of how and through what mediums knowledge should be transmitted to produce successful research uptake. The mediums should be appropriate to the use context and might include things such as lobbying research findings, use of data or web-based technologies. However this is not just a question of appropriate mediums for knowledge transmission, but speaks also to levels of detail required for the use context. In other words, it is about identifying how to best tailor evidence to the KT setting and the specific context within which the evidence is to be used.

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