

North West Futures Conference Notes from Workshop A

Steve Jones – Introduction to Workshop

Steve commented that while we may have an idea of what needs to be achieved, we may not be clear about the mechanisms to achieve it or how to implement them. He pointed out that in the case of the Wigan drugs project, ‘best practice’ was being applied and wasn’t working. He also stated that it may not be clear whether something worked, why it worked, or which bits of it worked. He asked whether there could be a better way of collaborating between academics and stakeholders.

Hal Wolman & Peter John – Best Practice Project (overheads included in delegate pack)

Nicola Yates – Wigan Drug Treatment Design Experiment (overheads included in delegate pack)

Peter John outlined the concept of the design experiment. It is used primarily where there is a lack of knowledge about what is likely to work. It involves close and ongoing collaboration between practitioners and researchers, close monitoring of the intervention, and modification of the intervention until it has the desired effects.

Steve Jones asked how innovation and the development of best practice can be developed in complex policy areas. He asked what partnerships and what techniques would be required to achieve this. He argued that this was about better deployment of public resources.

Discussion

Mick Sheldon argued that necessity is the mother of invention and that people’s lives depend on local government listening to the people they are working with. He stated that if something isn’t working, local government needs to acknowledge it and try to find alternatives. He emphasised the need to learn from what doesn’t work and to share that learning.

Steve Jones replied that central government often decides on best practice and that the inspection regime required conformity. He expressed hope that NWIN would enable learning from what doesn’t work.

David Wilkinson raised the issue of trying to apply a ‘best practice’ uniformly without taking account of variation. He expressed the need for academics to be able to gain an understanding of the complexities of how things really work on the ground.

John Schultz asked about the wider applicability of the results of a design experiment and argued that several design experiments in different locations are required.

Another audience member stated that it may not be what you are doing / the intricacies of the policies that matters but that you are doing something and engaging people and doing what they want you to do.

Hal Wolman noted that policies are often undertaken without a clear idea of their effects and may rely on 'prospective policy evaluation'. He conceded that practitioners often lack the time or resources to properly evaluate but that if they ask the right questions and follow the logic of evaluation (e.g. by considering the counterfactual – asking what would have happened without the intervention), this may be sufficient.

Nicola Yates emphasised that while it may be difficult to generalise the findings of the Wigan drugs project, the approach of treating drug users according to their individual needs and circumstances could be widened. She stated that the design experiment had already evolved as people moved away from the estate but that their progress could still be followed, contrary to other types of research which would have excluded them. She pointed out that the details of the project are agreed by the estate's community board which is dominated by the community.

John Schultz warned that with so many variables in an intervention and with the time taken for changes to occur, it may be difficult to isolate which variables are responsible for the change.

Nicola Yates agreed that you could never truly know the impact of an intervention as all drug addicts will come out the other side eventually but that an intervention may reduce the time taken.

Steve Jones concluded that if we can increase the probability that we have the right answer and that we know what works, it would be a major step forward.

John Schultz concluded that we need more than design experiments.

Comments

This was a very interesting workshop with an audience who engaged critically but enthusiastically with the concept of the design experiment.