CCL/SSHRC Knowledge Mobilization Symposium

May 15-18, 2008

Harrison Hot Springs, BC

Final Report

INTRODUCTION

From May 15 to 18, 2008, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) co-sponsored a symposium on knowledge mobilization in Harrison Hot Springs, British Columbia. The goal of the symposium was to stimulate informed discussion of the following questions:

- What is known about knowledge mobilization for learning (or how does research relate to and affect policy and practice with regard to learning across the life spectrum, with particular emphasis on schools)?

- What are the extent and quality of the evidence devoted to knowledge mobilization for learning?

- What knowledge mobilization practices are most widely used? Do we know how effective they are?

- What are the impacts of the most widely used practices and what are the reasons behind these impacts?

- What are the main barriers to more effective knowledge mobilization for learning?

- What are the major research questions regarding knowledge mobilization for learning that need to be addressed?

These questions, as well as a discussion paper prepared by Dr. Ben Levin (OISE/UT), a list of all confirmed participants and a copy of the symposium's agenda were shared with all participants in

advance of the symposium. A total of 22 participants were able to attend the event. In addition to representatives of the two host organizations, participants included researchers from both the academic and public sector in Canada and abroad,[1] civil servants, representatives from other publicly funded granting and/or research organizations (such as the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council and Human Resources and Social Development Canada), as well as consultants and knowledge mobilization practitioners from the private, not-for-profit, and educational sectors. Dr. David Phipps of York University in Toronto graciously accepted responsibility for chairing the symposium.

Reflecting the aforementioned initial questions and position paper, the symposium was divided into four main themes, namely: a) knowing knowledge mobilization; b) practicing knowledge mobilization; c) enhancing knowledge mobilization; and d) researching knowledge mobilization. The remainder of this report summarizes the salient ideas that emerged during the symposium, in accordance with these themes.[2] Other significant topics discussed at the symposium or garnered from reflections provided by participants following the event are also discussed. Suggested areas for action, based on participant feedback, comprise the last section of this report.

The observations and ideas reported here suggest that areas of agreement[3] are emerging with respect to important features of knowledge mobilization and to the factors that influence its effectiveness and impacts. This is in spite of the divergent and varied opinions that exist about the theoretical orientations, research priorities, and practices that appear to be shaping the knowledge

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[1] These included OISE, York University, Memorial University of Newfoundland, The University of British Columbia, Université du Québec à Montréal, Université Laval, the University of London, and the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation.

[2] The themes practicing knowledge mobilization and enhancing knowledge mobilization are closely related and it should be noted that participants often discussed these concomitantly. The separation of the salient ideas for each theme in this report is done primarily for clarity.

[3] The workshop participants did not specifically endorse positions or recommendations at the workshop.

mobilization field (as reflected in the section entitled Knowing Knowledge Mobilization). Symposium participants were united in their belief that knowledge mobilization can play a significant role in bridging the gap between research producers and research consumers and that this role is likely to grow in importance as the appetite for evidence-based and research-informed practice and decision-making continues to grow.[4] This optimism notwithstanding, there is evidence that knowledge mobilization organizations and practitioners commonly confront challenges of competing for attention in highly information-rich societies, of establishing their credibility, and of adapting to the uneven and unpredictable capacity of decision-makers to understand, consume, and conduct research (Ungerleider, 2007). These and other considerations were raised at the symposium and are likely to remain significant determinants of the effectiveness of present and future knowledge mobilization endeavours.

KNOWING KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

Initial discussions at the symposium focused on the lack of a general consensus about definitions of knowledge mobilization and its related concepts. There was also concern over ambiguous terminology[5] and over a perceived lack of agreement regarding the conceptual foundations of knowledge mobilization. These concerns were reflected in discussions of the challenges involved in assessing the availability and quality of the extant, relevant research and in helping give direction to emerging knowledge mobilization research, particularly with respect to knowledge mobilization in the area of learning.

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[4] As noted elsewhere, this might create further challenges for those working in the field of knowledge mobilization, as a growing appetite for publicly accessible and publicly used research could increase the difficulties involved in matching research traditions, processes, methods and timeframes to the needs for effective and timely decision-making in the public arena (see, for example, Burns & Schuller, 2007).

[5] This is reflected, for example, in the multiplication of terms related to knowledge mobilization, such as knowledge transfer, knowledge management, and knowledge exchange.

The lack of terminological agreement and conceptual clarity in the field of knowledge mobilization was seen as significant, in part, because it was perceived to compound the difficulties associated with identifying reasonable outcomes and reliable indicators of success for knowledge mobilization efforts. This was so, despite there being significant agreement among symposium participants that certain features are likely common to all knowledge mobilization efforts.

The first agreed-upon distinguishing feature of knowledge mobilization was identified as a desire to effect change, whether in terms of (a) increases in quantity of, in quality of, and/or in access to available knowledge; (b) improved capacity to make effective decisions and to innovate or develop new solutions to problems; or (c) more generally, shaping or improving professional practice in any given field, based on available evidence.[6] In addition to this implicit orientation toward change, participants suggested that knowledge mobilization entails awareness of the importance of "receptor capacity"[7] and a willingness to help develop this capacity when it is too limited to allow for the timely and effective use of available knowledge.

Finally, the willingness to use persuasive methods that call upon research-based evidence to effect change, rather than more coercive ones; the ability to promote the idea that certain forms of knowledge might or should be privileged over others with respect to decision making; and the capacity to access and synthesize multiple cases or bodies of evidence were all perceived as defining features of effective knowledge mobilization.

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[6] However, a number of participants conceptualized this orientation toward change more broadly as not strictly limited to immediate or measurable change but rather as including the establishment of habits or values that would enhance receptivity toward research when specific questions arise.

[7] "Receptor-capacity" was understood as the capacity of intended research consumers to understand and act upon new knowledge, which in turn was seen to be influenced by factors such as the extent of research training, professional priorities and responsibilities, and institutional or organizational cultures and goals.

PRACTICING KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

This theme was identified to draw attention to the factors that symposium participants believed most likely to facilitate or impede effective knowledge mobilization for learning. The following factors or determinants were proposed at the onset of the discussion:

    1. the issue of quality assurance and the lack of broad agreement on whether knowledge mobilization for learning entails the duty and/or the right by those involved in mobilizing research to assess the quality of research;

    2. the issue of access to knowledge, determined in turn by the extent to which a specific body of evidence or knowledge on an issue is widely and easily accessible or, conversely, more restricted; and by the time it takes for evidence and ideas to be exchanged between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers;

    3. the issue of grey literature and the difficulties involved in identifying and assessing this literature, which are compounded by the challenge of knowing what is and is not getting published, according to specific but changing criteria or standards;

    4. the issue of power relationships and the resulting problem of information or knowledge being used as currency or for leverage to effect, or sometimes block, change, in accordance with dominant societal values, political agendas, etc.;

    5. the issue of standards of practice in the knowledge mobilization field which, in their present fluid state, allow both excellent and mediocre, or even poor, practices to co-exist;

6. the issue of the neutral stance that can maximize the opportunities and value of the contributions made by knowledge brokers or mobilizers, as practices and expectations on what might be called "critical neutrality" on the part of knowledge brokers become the norm (in contrast with lobbying and/or deliberate advocacy orientations);

7. the issue of "fit for purpose" – the ability to locate, retrieve, conduct, interpret, and act upon the research, evidence or knowledge that is most suited to meeting identified needs; and

8. the issue of the extent and quality of training being dispensed to those likely to conduct, consume, or rely upon research, particularly in universities and in those fields where practitioners are being prepared through advanced postsecondary education (such as education).

In addition to these possible determinants of the quality and practice of knowledge mobilization, participants identified a number of areas for action that, if attended to, could increase the opportunities for and success of knowledge mobilization for learning. These included:

1. ensuring better understanding of the environments and conditions under which different actors play their roles (such as the often very different pragmatic realities of the academic community and of the bureaucratic/policy world);

2. encouraging the academic world to revisit its emphasis on publications in peer-reviewed journals, in particular, as a principal means of evaluating scholarly performance. This would also entail moving beyond the traditional role of academic researchers as producers of research to an expanded role as research interpreters;

3. creating more opportunities for interaction among practitioners, decision-makers and the graduate studies segment of academia (particularly in the area of education), and building exposure to these different environments as a standard, core component of graduate studies programs;

4. promoting the development of networks and relationships across disciplines and areas of practice to promote information-sharing about effective knowledge mobilization practices;

5. creating structures, processes and opportunities that support the integration of research knowledge and/or that allow research to become an integral part of professional practice (instead of simply making allocations for research when time, resources, and other factors permit); in short, creating infrastructures and opportunities that support a culture of practice that is favourable to research and the knowledge it can yield;

6. as required, re-designing or re-defining existing institutional roles and organizational mandates, processes, and activities to provide incentives to utilize and rely upon research as well as to integrate knowledge mobilization activities as an ongoing, core activity;

7. modifying funding cycles to ensure that these are long enough to sustain desired changes; and

8. integrating into research projects meaningful expectations for communication of results[8] to identified key audiences.

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[8] What some participants summarized as the "so what" and "now what" aspects of doing research that are all too often neglected in research dissemination efforts.

ENHANCING KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

Efforts at enhancing both the reach and effectiveness of knowledge mobilization mirrored the determinants and areas for action outlined in the previous section. These, in turn, were deemed to reflect the following, potentially useful principles for enhancing the impact and extent of knowledge mobilization efforts:

1. having an accurate understanding of the contexts within which knowledge mobilization efforts are expected to take place;

2. being flexible and responsive with regard to the needs and circumstances of identified knowledge producers, knowledge brokers, and decision-makers;

3. recognizing the importance of groups (networks, communities of practice) in shaping behaviours and practices, and as significant change agents at system-wide levels;

4. recognizing the importance of interpersonal relationships, both as determinants of individual receptivity toward knowledge mobilization efforts; and as factors likely to influence practice through previous experiences with knowledge mobilization;

5. embarking upon knowledge mobilization from the perspective of producing short, medium, and long-term changes -- the latter requiring, in particular, perseverance and the commitment of significant personnel, time, and financial resources;

6. incorporating what is known from various fields (such as social psychology, organizational behaviour, workplace learning, etc.) about how individuals learn and using this knowledge to focus knowledge mobilization efforts towards recognized best practices, or those

practices most likely to yield significant benefits. This might, for example, entail such

techniques and practices as ensuring that prior understandings about a topic are engaged

when communicating new information; integrating factual knowledge with conceptual

frameworks; and using meta-cognitive strategies to help intended knowledge consumers

take active control over the learning process;

7. ensuring that opportunities for discussion and exchange are a core component of all

knowledge mobilization efforts and interactions with any target audiences;

8. identifying opportunities and mechanisms that can, to paraphrase one of the participants,

help "create and sustain an appetite for the best of what we know" across stakeholder

groups (both actual and potential); and

9. identifying opportunities and mechanisms that can help support a critical stance toward

established knowledge, toward research, *and* toward prevalent or dominant questions.

RESEARCHING KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

Participants were asked to discuss how knowledge mobilization is and should be studied and

evaluated.[9] It was generally agreed that knowledge mobilization should be systematically

investigated, using valid and reliable instruments piloted with a range of respondents, across a

variety of methods and cases. Similarly, participants agreed that research about the consequences

of different knowledge mobilization activities was urgently required. Participants also felt that the

criteria currently used by granting agencies could and should be revised to ensure that a)

knowledge mobilization efforts become an integral, expected and valued component of all

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[9] A notion that was eloquently captured in one participant's question: "Where is the evidence that
providing evidence works?"

publicly funded research; b) indicators can begin to be devised to monitor the effectiveness of these efforts; and c) the reliability and value of these indicators can be assessed over time.

They also identified specific questions as requiring urgent attention in order to help identify principles and best practices for effective research on knowledge mobilization.
Among these questions were the following:

1. What are the characteristics of effective knowledge mobilizers or brokers (whether individuals or organizations)? Which of these characteristics contribute most significantly to effective knowledge mobilization?

2. What promotes information—or knowledge-seeking behaviours in different groups—in particular, learning by practitioners and decision-makers? In short, what factors make it more likely that individuals and/or organizations will seek out research as way of developing an answer to specific problems or concerns?

3. What do people do with the information and/or knowledge they encounter? Are behaviours and practices affected most by newly acquired knowledge that is individually sought out or by knowledge that is externally provided or transmitted by authoritative and mandated knowledge brokers? What processes are at work or influence knowledge mobilization when moving from awareness of an issue to knowledge uptake followed by sustained behavioural/attitudinal uptake?

4. What structures and processes contribute to the development and persistence of a knowledge mobilization culture both within organizations and in society-at-large?

5. What training and/or prior learning experiences best prepare individuals to be research consumers? And research producers?

6. How can a sustained appetite for 'wanting to know' be created?

7. How can the organizational consequences of knowledge mobilization efforts be studied within and across systems?

8. What are reliable indicators of knowledge mobilization effectiveness?

9. What is available nationally and internationally with regard to knowledge mobilization training? Are existing training options effective?

10. Is there a market for knowledge mobilization activities? If so, what and where is it? What factors might contribute to or work against expansion of these activities? How can value be assigned to knowledge mobilization activities?

ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants felt strongly that the consequences of not knowing—whether not knowing was defined as not having access to the best and most reliable research or evidence in relation to a particular issue, or as not knowing what constitutes effective knowledge mobilization—are far-reaching. They indicated the following as some of the most significant possible consequences: inefficient investment or policy decisions; failing to meet the needs of practitioners; the risk of creating expectations in the realm of practice that cannot be met; undermining public confidence in research; the squandering of learning opportunities; and the misallocation of funds for research that yields little or no benefit for learners.

Despite the wide range of perspectives held by symposium participants, there was considerable support for specific suggestions for action that participants felt would help further the knowledge mobilization agenda in Canada. Although this is, once again, not an exhaustive list, the suggestions listed below offer a sampling of the most frequently mentioned recommendations by symposium participants:

- undertake scans and/or produce maps of what is known about knowledge mobilization as a topic of study, as an area of practice, and as an area of training;

- improve training of undergraduate and graduate students, as well as researchers, with respect to best practices for the conduct and use of systematic reviews;

- develop mechanisms or incentives that would support greater use of systematic reviews for knowledge synthesis and for setting future research agendas (depending, of course, on the availability of the relevant research literature);

- identify tri-council initiatives for joint knowledge mobilization;

- review undergraduate- and graduate-level education to support preparation of students as research consumers;

- encourage post-secondary institutions to incorporate "non-traditional" scholarship into tenure and promotion guidelines (ideally based on a scan of the practices already in use);

- make available grants that support and make possible research dissemination and/or knowledge mobilization efforts;

- provide post-secondary education institutions with incentives to develop research mobilization units, similar to industry liaison and/or technology transfer units currently in existence in many institutions;

- develop new post-doctoral streams for scholar-practitioners, which would act as the knowledge mobilization equivalent to an MD/PhD program.

- have funders hold calls for research on knowledge mobilization that would require strategic partnerships between evaluation researchers, researchers and their knowledge mobilization partners. s

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