

Evaluation in the 'new' knowledge age

Evaluators are being swept up in the endlessly hyped knowledge age of the new millennium. We're being pressured to generate lessons learned and identify 'best practices.' To do so with authenticity, we're going to need to bring some rigor to these powerful sound-bite notions of 'lessons learned' and 'best practices'.

The great lesson learned in the last decade of the last millennium was that information is not the same as knowledge. (Wow! Who knew?) In multinational corporations, the information age has given way to the knowledge-hungry age. Chief Information Officers, all the rage in the 1990s, have been replaced by Chief Knowledge Officers. And what do Chief Knowledge Officers do? They capture *lessons learned* and identify *best practices*.

Best practices have become the most sought after form of knowledge. Not just effective practices, or decent practices, or better practices – but best. It's the American way. Be the best you can be. How? Learn lessons (personal, local knowledge) and convert them to best practices (universal knowledge).

The federal government publishes best practices for education, health, highways, and welfare reform. Philanthropic foundations are anxious to discover, fund, and disseminate best practices. Corporations advertise that they follow best practices. Management consultants teach best practices. One company of consultants, *Best Practices, LLC*, has created a 'Best Practice Database' derived from 'studying world-class customer service practices [that] foster higher quality customer service and satisfaction ...' Best Practices Benchmarking™ reports provide 'fast and effective access and intelligence to world-class excellence' (www.best-in-class.com).

While the profession of evaluation will inevitably be affected by concepts swirling in the larger political environment, we have an obligation to examine those concepts with care and to educate users about their deeper implications. For example, the assumptions undergirding the phrase 'best practices' (e.g., that there must be a single best way to do something) are highly suspect. In a world that values diversity, many paths exist for reaching some destination; some may be

more difficult and some more costly, but those are criteria that take us beyond just getting there and reveal the importance of asking, *'best' from whose perspective using what criteria?*

From a systems point of view, a major problem with many 'best practices' is the way they are offered without attention to context. A lot of 'best practices' rhetoric presumes context-free adoption. 'Best practices' that are highly prescriptive and specific (e.g., 'first graders should be read to by teachers out loud at least fifteen minutes a day' – to cite an example I

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was shown by a teacher) represent bad practice of best practices. In contrast, 'best practices' that are principles to guide practice can be helpful. To further illustrate (and be provocative), I consider the utilization-focussed mantra that evaluations should be focussed on 'intended use by intended users' an evaluation 'best practice' at the principle level. However, identifying specific intended uses with specific intended users can only be undertaken in a specific context and situation. So, what's one of the most common questions I get after presentations on Utilization-Focussed Evaluation: How many intended users should an evaluation have? My response: As many as it takes to support intended uses, no more, and no fewer. And how many intended uses can an evaluation support? As many as it takes to meet the needs of primary intended users. Circular reasoning is a wonderful antidote to linear, mechanistic thinking – which characterizes much (but not all) 'best practices' practice. Going in circles at least keeps people from going some place where they'll do harm. All in all, I prefer to eschew the language of 'best practices'. Calling something 'best' is typically more a political assertion than an empirical conclusion.

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