International Practice Development Journal

Online journal of FoNS in association with the IPDC (ISSN 2046-9292)

COMMENTARY

Exploring the utility of a 'PRAXIS' evaluation framework in capturing transformation: a tool for all seasons?

Jan Dewing

The overall aim of evaluation research in a social research context is usually to provide useful information or feedback about the evaluant. The relationship between information or feedback from evaluation and how it contributes to decision making and subsequent action is not always clear or straight forward. For example, timeliness of influencing decision-making can be critical. Yet some evaluation research can seem to exist within another time dimension and miss the boat completely. It is not uncommon for findings to lag behind or be completely retrospective to decision making processes (Wisdom, p 221). Part of this, of course, is about the way researchers engage with sponsors and stakeholders and the ability of the research to release useful feedback as a continuous process. Speaking of time, Sommerlad and Ramsden (2001, p 49 cited in Wisdom, 2002, p 222) comment on the time it takes for professionals coming from different practice and educational worlds to come together and develop a shared concepts, terms and theories. I am wondering how PRAXIS can account for the different dimensions of timeliness in evaluation research alongside its stated intentions of contributing to organisational transformation.

It is relatively easy to locate PRAXIS within a critical social science paradigm given the values that underpin it. The approach seems to cross several sub-disciplines within social research as it emphasises the phenomenological and anthropological importance of experience and selective interpretation, context and user and stakeholders. Although it is less easy to see the particulars of this because at this early state of its inception the authors seem to want to look for a fit with many if not all aspects of critical social science (for example Habermas, 1991; Hegel, 1998; Fay, 1987; Freire, 1973), praxis (cf. Grundy, 1982, Connor, 2004) and evaluation (cf. House, 2000; Pawson and Tilley, 1997) to name some. To be robust, an approach does not need to tick all the boxes as this can suggest philosophical muddling or incompatibility. However, it does need consistency with the internal relationship of the approach; between its core values and concepts. I would be interested to hear from the authors how they intend to further theoretically develop their ideas and approach.

From reading the paper, I am puzzling about the exact identity of PRAXIS; is it an approach, a specific framework or a tool? We are constantly being offered and some of us, creating new tools that claim to revolutionise or make a significant evolution to our practice. Claims are often made that tools can do all range of wonders. However, tools cannot do anything other than what the people who use them are capable of doing and what the users within the context and culture can accommodate. Certainly some tools are more sophisticated than others and offer more flexibility, although a quality or sophisticated tool in the hands of a novice will not necessary lead to excellence in outcomes. It is necessary to ensure clarity around what is a tool, a framework and whether or not a framework is a representation of a methodology or not. I would argue that to turn something as complex and multi-dimensional as evaluation research into a tool is asking for trouble.

The claim about PRAXIS as a tool for all seasons, ignoring the tool part and focusing on the seasons, also causes me some discomfort. I note the claims that PRAXIS has intentions of being non-hierarchical and democratic and is concerned with engaging others with transformational change, as it occurs and to be used as part of broader transformational practice change. There are inherent inconsistencies here, as not all evaluation research aims or even wants, to be associated with the processes and outcomes discussed in the paper. This then led me to ask how would researchers know when to use or not to use PRAXIS as an approach? What are the inclusion and exclusion criteria; if there were to be such things? The whole position, as to if, when and what types of transformation will evolve from practice development activities is not yet predictable. How it fits with the different approaches of technical, emancipatory and transformational practice development still needs clarifying. If this is a tool for all seasons, then it needs to show how it can be both collapsed and expanded across the range of practice development approaches. My view is that it isn't a tool and it isn't a tool for all seasons. It is however, a very appealing approach that would, in some practice development work, very well suit one or two seasons.

Opening up the commentary now, I am interested in how the authors could link PRAXIS to wider collaboration theory and how they understand such theory to develop evaluation strategies that can increase stakeholder capacity to understand, examine, and capitalise on the power of organisational transformation. For example Gajda and Koliba (2007) from their literature review found six key traits: (a) shared purpose, (b) cycle of inquiry, (c) dialogue, (d) decision making, (e) action and (f) evaluation. Clearly an evaluation approach such as PRAXIS is not at the same level as collaboration theory. Although in my reading there is clearly a role for evaluation within collaboration theory and maybe some overlap within PRAXIS and some of the other traits as identified by Gajda and Koliba (2007). In addition, there are many times when socially located and action oriented research raises ethical and moral challenges. I feel this aspect of the approach needs more consideration.

In summary, this paper highlights the blurring of boundaries between social research and evaluation. I would argue that PRAXIS helps highlight further challenges around knowledge creation, co-construction and implementation of knowledge within localised contexts and could contribute to organisational growth in a number of areas. My current understanding is that PRAXIS is an approach rather than a specific framework or a tool. I wish the authors well in their continued unearthing of the relationships between the bits of the puzzle they have unearthed and those still to be dug up and recommend some distillation activity: for as Collins (2001, p 91) determines, great organisations with the capacity for positive growth are able to distillate a complex world into a simple organising idea, a basic principle, or concept to unify and guide. Does PRAXIS have this unifying ability?

References

Collins, J. (2001) *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make The Leap … And Others Don't.* New York: Harper Business.

Connor, M. (2004) The practical discourse in philosophy and nursing: an exploration of linkages and shifts in the evolution of praxis. *Nursing Philosophy.* No. 5. No. 1. pp 54-66.

Fay, B. (1987) *Critical Social Science: Liberation and its limits*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Friere, P. (1973) *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Gajda, R. and Koliba, C. (2007) Evaluating the imperative of intra-organisational collaboration. *American Journal of Evaluation*. Vol. 28. No. 1. pp 26-44.

Grundy, S. (1982) Three modes of action research. *Curriculum Perspectives.* Vol. 2. No. 3. pp 23-34.

Habermas, J. (1991) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1998) *Phenomenology of Spirit.* India: Narenda Prakash Jain.

House, E.R. (2000) *New Directions for Evaluation.* London: Wiley.

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage Publications.

Wilson, V., Hardy, S. and Brown, R. (2008) An exploration of practice development evaluation: unearthing praxis. Chp 8 *in* Manley, K., McCormack, B. and Wilson, V. (eds) (2008) *International Practice Development in Nursing and Healthcare*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. pp 147-169.

Wisdom, J. (2002) Towards a culture of evaluation. Chp 18 *in* Macdonald, R. and Wisdom, J. (eds). (2002) *Academic and Educational Development. Research, Evaluation and Changing Practice in Higher Education.* London: Routledge. pp 217-240.

Jan Dewing (PhD, MN, BSc, RN, RNT, Dip Nurs Ed, Dip Nurs), Professor of Person-centred Research and Practice Development, East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust and Canterbury Christchurch University, Kent, England. Visiting Professor, Person-centred Practice Research Centre University of Ulster, Northern Ireland. Visiting Professor Aged Care and Practice Development, School of Nursing Midwifery and Indigenous Health Studies, University of Wollongong NSW (in partnership with Uniting Care Ageing SE Region).