

American Journal of Evaluation

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American Journal of Evaluation 2001; 22; 329
DOI: 10.1177/109821400102200307

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Evaluation, Knowledge Management, Best Practices, and High Quality Lessons Learned

MICHAEL QUINN PATTON

INTRODUCTION

In the endlessly hyped *knowledge age* of the new millennium, evaluators are being asked to generate lessons learned and best practices. Pressure to do so seems only likely to increase. At the end of this article I'll suggest a way of bringing some increased rigor to evaluators' use of these terms, but first I'll examine and opine on popular usage and the current context.

The demand for knowledge acquisition, which demonstrates membership in the elite ranks of learning organizations, has crescendoed into an organizational development and program evaluation mania. But just what is popularly meant by a *best practice*? What does it mean to *learn a lesson*? And what's evaluation's role in all this?

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

In this age of global capitalist ascendancy, knowledge has become "intellectual capital." During the agricultural age, land tenure emerged as the dominant form of wealth. In the industrial age, financial capital moved the world. Now, in the knowledge age, corporations are focusing on "intellectual capital," which includes lessons learned and best practices. *Executive Edge* magazine (*Executive Edge*, 1998) identified knowledge management as the cutting edge priority for organizational development and explained:

Knowledge Management... is a process that harvests and shares an organization's collective knowledge to achieve breakthrough results in productivity and innovation. In contrast, Information Management merely collects, processes, and condenses information.

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American Journal of Evaluation, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2001, pp. 329–336. All rights of reproduction in any form reserved. ISSN: 1098-2140 Copyright © 2002 by American Evaluation Association.

Knowledge Management is a collaborative management discipline that aims to make employees smarter, more innovative, and better decision makers (p. 16).

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE NOTION OF BEST PRACTICES

The emphasis on knowledge generation disseminated in the form of best practices has swept like wildfire through all sectors of society. 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. Measuring, managing, and improving upon intellectual capital has quickly become one of corporate America's top priorities, according to *Knowledge Management of Internal Best Practices (Best Practices, LLC, 2001)*. Their benchmarking study and "BestPracticeDatabase" provides an example of what is being promulgated. 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:

. . . Using best practice research findings, the Best Practices, LLC research team identified key performance dimensions or sub-elements that are cornerstones of the integrated management system. The key performance dimensions include:

1. Link Best Practices to Strategy Fulfillment
2. Best Practice Identification Systems
3. Best Practice Recognition Systems
4. Communicating Best Practices
5. Best Practice Knowledge Sharing Systems
6. Ongoing Nurturing of Best Practices" (<http://www.best-in-class.com/>)

Evaluation and Best Practices

Whatever is hot in the corporate world quickly finds its way into the government, not-for-profit, and philanthropic sectors. Evaluators need to pay attention to this rhetoric (dare one say "hype"?) because it is already affecting expectations from our stakeholders about what kind of findings we should produce. 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 (local knowledge about what works) and convert them to best practices (universal knowledge about what works, at least by implication of being *best*).

I've looked at a lot of lists of "lessons learned" and "best practices" and I haven't found anything that systematically differentiates one from the other in terms of content or empirical support. Those of more modest inclination seem to favor "lessons learned" which connotes, at least to me, a more personal and local form of insight. Those with more *chutzpah* (though not necessarily, as far as I can tell, more evidence) prefer the more generalized and harder-hitting (connotatively) assertion of having discovered a "best practice." Seldom do such statements identify for whom the practice is best, under what conditions it is best, or what values or assumptions undergird its *best-ness*.

I would suggest that widespread and indiscriminate use of the terms "lessons learned" and "best practice" has devalued them both conceptually and pragmatically because they lack

any common meaning, standard, or definition. 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. Suppose automobile engineers identified the best fuel injection system, the best transmission, the best engine cooling system, the best suspension system, and so forth. (This identification process would be facilitated by Michael Scriven using the most appropriate weights and sums method with appropriate criteria and data, etc., so we’d know each is really the best in its class.) Let us further suppose, as is likely, that these best subsystems (fuel injection, etc.) come from different car models (Lexus, Infiniti, Audi, Mercedes, etc.). When one had assembled all the “best” systems from all the best cars, they would not constitute a working car. Each best part (subsystem) would have been designed to go together with other specifically designed parts for a specific model of car. They’re not interchangeable. Yet, a lot of “best practices” rhetoric presumes context-free adoption.

“Best practices” that are principles to guide practice can be helpful. “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 was shown by a teacher) represents bad practice of best practices. To further illustrate (and be provocative), I consider the utilization-focused mantra that evaluations should be focused 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, one of the most common questions I get after presentations on Utilization-Focused Evaluation is: 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. The substitute phrases “better practices” or “effective practices” tend less toward overgeneralization, providing there is reasonable evidence to support such an assertion in terms of both internal and external validity criteria. That said, and along those lines, let me propose a way of rescuing the language of “lessons learned.”

LESSONS LEARNED MANIA

The popular hunger for knowledge and wisdom seems to know no bounds. Books offer “lessons learned” about how to live the good life from observing grizzly bears (McMillion, 1998), cats (Dromgoole, 2000), horses (Rashid & Ball, 1993; Witter, 1998), dogs

(Dromgoole, 1999), gardens (Glyck, 1997), stopping and *selling* the roses (McCann, 1998), golf (Love, 1979), shopping at the mall (Twyman, 2001), or hiking the Appalachian Trail (Platt, 2000)—to sample but a few examples. When Newt Gingrich decided to run for President of the United States, he published a book entitled *Lessons Learned the Hard Way* (1998) to show that he was hip to what the knowledge age requires: being a lesson learner. *Esquire* magazine has a monthly “Lessons I’ve Learned” feature that offers “wisdom” from celebrities to the great unwashed. Indeed, peruse any mass media publication and you’re likely to find a broad array of vacuous advice under the heading “lessons learned.”

Evaluation and Lessons Learned

All of the preceding is by way of context. Evaluation, not being an ivory tower activity (at least not primarily, though there are exceptions) is influenced by trends, hopes, and fads in the larger world. Scriven (1993) was early, as he often is, with his *Hard-Won Lessons in Program Evaluation*, a series of personal opinions and preferences, insightful and important to be sure, but, in the end, still personal opinions and preferences. Alkin, Hofstetter, and Ai (1998, pp. 109–111), have offered, in contrast, “Lessons Learned From Stakeholder Approaches” based on their review of research and theory. The Fall 2000 issue of the *American Journal of Evaluation* illustrates how this trend toward reporting lessons learned has picked up steam. The feature article is Stufflebeam’s “Lessons in Contracting for Evaluation.” Bullock and Ory follow with an article on evaluating instructional technology implementation that offers three pages of lessons learned (pp. 324–326). The ethical case discussion in the issue concludes with “Lessons” (Affholter, 2000, pp. 377–380). The issue also includes a book review of *Building Effective Evaluation Capacity: Lessons from Practice* (Grasso, 2000).

As befits a profession that keeps up with the times, evaluation has moved from just generating findings about specific programs to generating knowledge. In the 3rd edition of *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Patton, 1997) I added knowledge generation to the menu of evaluation purposes and learning lessons to the list of evaluation uses, neither of which had appeared in prior editions. At the same time, Chelimsky (1997) distinguished three purposes for evaluation: accountability; program development; and generating knowledge.

Knowledge-oriented Evaluation

Both judgment-oriented and improvement-oriented evaluations involve the *instrumental* use of results. Instrumental use occurs when a decision or action follows, at least in part, from the evaluation. *Conceptual use of findings*, on the other hand, contrasts with instrumental use in that no decision or action is expected; rather, it involves the use of evaluations to influence thinking and deepen understanding by increasing knowledge. This knowledge can be as specific as clarifying a program’s model, testing theory, distinguishing types of interventions, figuring out how to measure outcomes, generating lessons learned, and/or elaborating policy options. In other cases, conceptual use is more vague, such that the findings may reduce uncertainty, offer illumination, enlighten funders and staff about what participants really experience, enhance communications, and facilitate sharing of perceptions. In early studies

of utilization, such uses were overlooked or denigrated. In recent years, they have come to be more appreciated and valued.

[G]eneralizations from evaluation can percolate into the stock of knowledge that participants draw on. Empirical research has confirmed this. . . [D]ecision makers indicate a strong belief that they are influenced by the ideas and arguments that have their origins in research and evaluation. Case studies of evaluations and decisions tend to show that generalizations and ideas that come from research and evaluation help shape the development of policy. The phenomenon has come to be known as “enlightenment”.., an engaging idea. The image of evaluation as increasing the wattage of light in the policy arena brings joy to the hearts of evaluators (Weiss, 1990, pp. 176–177).

Shadish (1987) has argued that the understandings gleaned from evaluations ought to contribute to “macrotheories” about “how to produce important social change” (p. 94). Scheirer (1987) has contended that evaluators ought to draw on and contribute to “implementation theory” to better understand the “what and why of program delivery” (p. 59). Such knowledge-generating efforts focus beyond the effectiveness of a particular program to future program designs and policy formulation in general.

As the field of evaluation has matured and a vast number of evaluations has accumulated, the opportunity has arisen to look across findings about specific programs to formulate generalizations about effectiveness. This involves synthesizing findings from different studies. These kinds of “lessons” constitute accumulated wisdom—principles of effectiveness or “best practices”—that can be adapted, indeed, must be adapted, to specific programs or even entire organizations.

In the philanthropic world, “cluster evaluations” look across a number of individual grants, typically for the purpose of learning lessons about effectiveness. A cluster evaluation team visits a number of different grantee projects with a similar focus (e.g., grassroots leadership development) and draws on individual grant evaluations to identify patterns across and lessons from the whole cluster. The McKnight Foundation commissioned a cluster evaluation of 34 separate grants aimed at aiding families in poverty. An example of a lesson learned was that “effective programs have developed processes and strategies for learning about the *strengths* as well as the needs of families in poverty” (Patton, Bringewatt, Campbell, Dewar, & Mueller, 1993, p. 10).

Such generalizable evaluation findings about principles of effective programming have become the knowledge base of our profession. Being knowledgeable about patterns of program effectiveness allows evaluators to provide guidance about development of new initiatives, policies, and strategies for implementation. Such contributions constitute the conceptual use of evaluation findings. Efforts of this kind may be considered *research* rather than evaluation, but such research is ultimately evaluative in nature and important to the profession.

HIGH-QUALITY LESSONS LEARNED

As noted earlier, a common problem when some idea becomes highly popular, in this case, the search for lessons learned, is that the idea loses its substance and meaning. Ricardo Millett, former Director of Evaluation at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and I reviewed together the kinds of “lessons learned” and “best practices” that were offered in cluster

evaluation reports. We found that the items included under these umbrella labels were so broad and inclusive that the phrases lacked any consistent meaning. As these phrases became widely used, they began to be applied to any kind of insight, evidentially-based or not. We began thinking about what would constitute a “high-quality lesson learned” and decided that one’s confidence in the transferability or extrapolated relevance of a supposed lesson learned would increase to the extent that it was supported by multiple sources and types of learnings. Exhibit 1 presents a list of kinds of evidence that could be accumulated to support a proposed lesson learned, making it more worthy of application and adaptation to new settings if it has independent triangulated support from a variety of perspectives. Questions for generating “lessons learned” are also listed.

High-quality lessons learned, then, represent principles extrapolated from multiple sources and independently *triangulated* to increase transferability as cumulative knowledge or working hypotheses that can be adapted and applied to new situations, a form of pragmatic utilitarian generalizability, if you will. The internal validity of any single source of knowledge would need to be judged in terms of the criteria appropriate for that type of knowledge. Thus, practitioner wisdom and evaluation studies may be internally validated in different ways. However, when these various types and sources of knowledge cohere, triangulate, and reinforce each other, that very coalescence increases the likelihood of external validity, perhaps sufficient to justify designation as a *triangulated better practice*, or a *high-quality lesson learned*.

One of the challenges facing the profession of evaluation going forward will be to bring some degree of rigor to these popular notions of “lessons learned” and “best practices.” Such rigor takes on added importance as, increasingly, the substantive contribution of evaluation includes not only how to conduct high-quality evaluations but also generating knowledge based on having learned how to synthesize cross-program findings about patterns of effective interventions, that is, better practices in program design and lessons learned about effective programming generally. The future status and utility of our field may depend on the rigor and integrity we bring to these challenges.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The implications for evaluation strike me as the following: (1) As a field, through our conferences, listservs, and journals, we should continue monitoring the usage and meaning of these and related terms; (2) we should dialogue about ways of bringing rigor to these popular concepts; (3) we should identify and hold up for emulation exemplars of high-quality lessons learned; and (4) we should especially pay attention to how our profession is affected by having moved from being primarily a reservoir of methods for evaluation to now also becoming and being a reservoir for knowledge about generic patterns of program effectiveness.

EXHIBIT 1

High-Quality Lessons Learned

High-quality lessons learned: Knowledge that can be applied to future action and derived from screening according to specific criteria:

1. Evaluation findings—patterns across programs;
2. Basic and applied research;
3. Practice wisdom and experience of practitioners;
4. Experiences reported by program participants/clients/intended beneficiaries;
5. Expert opinion;
6. Cross-disciplinary connections and patterns;
7. Assessment of the importance of the lesson learned; and
8. Strength of the connection to outcomes attainment.

The idea is that the greater the number of supporting sources for a “lesson learned,” the more rigorous the supporting evidence, and the greater the *triangulation of supporting sources*, the more confidence one has in the significance and meaningfulness of a lesson learned. Lessons learned with only one type of supporting evidence would be considered a “lessons learned hypothesis.” Nested within and cross-referenced to lessons learned should be the actual cases from which practice wisdom and evaluation findings have been drawn. A critical principle here is to maintain the contextual frame for lessons learned, that is, to keep lessons learned grounded in their context. For ongoing learning, the trick is to follow future supposed applications of lessons learned to test their wisdom and relevance over time in action in new settings.

Questions for Generating High-Quality Lessons Learned

1. What is meant by a “*lesson*?”
2. What is meant by “*learned*?”
3. By whom was the lesson learned?
4. What’s the evidence supporting each lesson?
5. What’s the evidence the lesson was learned?
6. What are the contextual boundaries around the lesson (that is, under what conditions does it apply)?
7. Is the lesson specific, substantive, and meaningful enough to guide practice in some concrete way?
8. Who else is likely to care about this lesson?
9. What evidence will they want to see?
10. How does this lesson connect with other “lessons?”

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