

Five minutes with Huw Davies: “When contextualised, research has the power to animate, inform, empower or infuriate”

by Blog Admin

March 23, 2012

Following our recent conference, ‘From Research to Policymaking’, [Huw Davies](#), presents a handful of observations on how to treat academic research in order to give it the best foundations when before it enters the policymaking process.



Much study of how knowledge gets created and used has shed light on the sometimes elusive relationship between research and policy (see, for example, *Using Evidence*, by Nutley, Walter & Davies; Policy Press, 2007). From such careful study a number of observations can be made:

Research Does Not Speak For Itself: research needs to be actively translated in communication; it needs to be set in context, and it needs to be brought to life. By itself, ‘research’ is just inanimate data: in conversation and contextualised it has the power to animate, inform, empower or infuriate. It has the latent capacity to become knowledge, or even evidence.

Research Does Not Stand Alone: of course any research must be seen in the context of other research, gradually building up a picture of our social world. Individual studies have far less value than careful synthesis and review. But more than this, research needs to be interpreted in the context of local systems, cultures and resources; and explored with an understanding of political sensitivities, expediencies and implementation challenges.

Research Has To Be Integrated: research ways of knowing have to be integrated with other forms of knowing: knowing that comes from a complex and sophisticated conceptual understanding of the world (including ideological preferences), and knowing that comes from deep experience, including tacit ways of knowing or feeling.

Using Research is Often Not An Event: use of research is often better seen as a dynamic and iterative process, usually faltering, but occasionally dramatic; most often seen better in retrospect than in prospect. Research-based ideas can slowly seep into policy discourse in a slow and percolative way, gradually changing the sense of what is important or what is possible in policy debates.

It’s Not Just Learning – Unlearning Matters Too: letting go of previously cherished notions, conceptual models or so-called ‘facts about the world’ can be as important as the acquisition of new understandings. But this is far from simple: the new does not necessarily displace the old. Sometimes uncomfortable accommodations or amalgamations are made.

Knowledge is Often Co-Produced: rather than seeing research as the preserve of technical experts, new policy-relevant knowledge often comes from collaborative processes that break down the distinction between roles – where technical expertise around data meets other forms of knowing rooted in experience or a sense of the possible. Shared journeys can produce shared understandings.

Knowledge Creation is Deeply Social: the creation of knowledge from various ingredients (including, but by no means limited to, research) is therefore a deeply social and contextual process – happening through interaction and dialogue. It reflects a persuasive process triggered as much in the gut as in the brain.

Not Products But Process: from all of this it then makes more sense to think of ongoing processes of

knowing than the creation and sharing of knowledge products, and so...

It's Not All About Decisions But More Often About Framings: because research often has the most profound impacts not when it directly underpins specific decisions (instrumentalist action) but instead when it causes shifts in the language, concepts, conceptual models or frameworks that are used to define the contours of the policy landscape. Research can be at its most powerful when it shakes prior certainties, questions core assumptions or even re-shapes cherished values.

So, when we focus on research as proving evidence for policy decisions we both overplay its short-term role as technical arbiter and undersell its longer-term transformative power.

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