

2009 International Campbell Collaboration (C2) Colloquium

Submitter Information

Mark Pearson

Email: mark.pearson@pms.ac.uk

Abstract Information

Abstract Title:

Synthesising and utilising complex evidence to inform policy in education and health

Format:

Symposium

Themes:

systematic review methods

Authors:

Henry Potts, Geoff Wong, Rod Sheaff, Mark Pearson

Abstract:

This session comprises four papers that consider how systematic review methods may be developed in order to make the best use of complex evidence in education and health. The methods and approaches reflected upon in these papers are not drawn from a single research tradition, but share a common goal of broadening the methodological scope of systematic reviews and better understanding the utilisation of knowledge produced in this way. The first paper (Henry Potts) reports an ongoing review using a meta-narrative approach to make sense of the diverse sources of knowledge regarding electronic patient records. The review method has stressed the importance of understanding knowledge from within the research tradition in which it was produced; it is argued that this has important implications for the way that evidence is utilised in the policy making process. The second paper (Geoff Wong) reflects upon the experience of using an explicit realist approach in the synthesis of the evidence in Internet based learning. This realist synthesis offers a method of making sense of the highly heterogeneous and context dependent evidence which exists in this field thus enabling greater insights into what makes such educational interventions 'work'. The third paper (Rod Sheaff) reports a review of the predominantly qualitative research literature on organisational structures and their impacts upon policy outcomes in health systems. A scoping study found 14389 relevant papers of which 1568 were selected for review. These studies were very variable in the amount and quality of the qualitative data, hence 'evidence', which they reported. The paper describes an attempt to adapt realist methods so as to synthesise such bodies of research in ways which take account of this variation in the strength of qualitative evidence. The fourth paper (Mark Pearson) draws upon the work of Donald Campbell and colleagues in order to gain a fuller understanding of how systematic reviews are utilised in the policy making process. It is argued that interpretive approaches to understanding policy making (such as rhetorical analysis) need to be tempered with a more nuanced understanding of research validity. The case is made that interpretive approaches not only can, but should, be melded with research validity to increase understanding of the policy making process.
