When are you ever not 'piloting'?
How action research can help to deliver better public services
Cathy Sharp, *Research for Real,* February 2012[1]

Introduction

Current debates about redefining the relationship between public services and communities can sit uneasily at a time when it feels more important to focus on saving costs and retain essential services. Yet, there are some significant ideas being debated across the UK on the future delivery of public services; at their heart is the call for public services to be more responsive by involving individuals and communities in shaping the way services are designed and delivered. This short article is written in the hope of generating debate about how to do this. It is hoped to interest people from many kinds of organisations and communities. It points the way to the creation of an energising and *'consumer-driven systemic logic by building-in inquiry'* into the fabric of the everyday practice of public services (Wadsworth, 2011).

Public service reform

People who work in public services and communities are hungry for ways to respond to the needs and rights of service users in more effective and sustainable ways.   Many social problems appear to be resistant to change, are highly complex and uncertain, and involve a variety of different, dynamic and indirect relationships and interactions between people and organisations. Within almost any area of work, at both national and local level there are many strategies, plans, good practice guides, procedures and targets within a '*cluttered landscape*' of partnerships.[2] Yet, the expected improvements in outcomes have not always materialised and in some cases, inequalities have become worse. These situations have been described as *'wicked'* in which no previously tried or known solution applies and no single party has 'the answer' (Grint, Undated).

In acknowledging these conditions of complexity and uncertainty, the discussion of public service reform has made the case for a focus on prevention and early intervention; a focus on 'assets' rather than deficits; and for new collaborative relationships to enhance outcomes and build resilience (Deacon, 2011) (GCPH, 2011). In Scotland, the Christie Commission called for a radical, new and collaborative culture (Christie Commission, 2011). The Scottish Community Development Centre has suggested that this is a critical point where decisions need to be taken on how best to equip public sector staff and key agencies with the skills and capacity to work *with* communities to ensure that resilience and capacity is built within the most disadvantaged communities to help them respond effectively to current economic conditions (SCDC, 2011). The IPPR and PWC suggest that the traditional model of public service delivery, predicated on people passively consuming services whenever they need them, is neither sustainable nor desirable (IPPR & PWC, 2010). These kinds of change are as much about changing mindsets as money.

There is now a wider understanding of why outcomes matter; of the need for clarity about the changes expected as a result of service efforts and recognition that it is rarely possible to deliver such results without working alongside others. Many people that use public services have plenty of experience of being *'done to'*: of assumptions being made about their needs and capacities, of not being consulted, or where they have been, not really heard. The idea of 'coproduction' recognises and aims to combine and strengthen different kinds of knowledge and experience to develop more effective solutions and shift the balance of power from the professional towards the service user (Boyle, D., Coote, A., Sherwood, C., & Slay, J, 2010). In discussing the changing role of professionals in this context, others have suggested that professionals should see themselves as *'Sherpas, increasingly looking to provide options and guidance, rather than definitive answers'* or have talked about *'working with people, rather than simply processing them'*.[3] These debates focusing on

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[1] www.research-for-real.co.uk
[2] This term has been used widely. See Audit Scotland, *Review of Community Health Partnerships*, June 2011
http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/health/2011/nr_110602_chp.pdf
[3] Griffiths *et al* (2009) quoted in (IPPR & PWC, 2010) and (Boyle, D., Coote, A., Sherwood, C., & Slay, J, 2010)

service coproduction suggest a significant cultural shift requiring skills of enabling and facilitation, as well as the ability to change systems and operate on a large scale.

How can we create effective whole system change?

In responding to the Christie Commission report the Scottish Government called for leaders of Community Planning Partnerships to *'disrespect boundaries'* between public services and focus on the achievement of shared outcomes and cross-sectoral workforce development strategies (Scottish Government, 2011). This is a huge challenge and despite the recognition of the need for a cultural shift little has been said about how to bring such change about.

Danny Burns has argued that effective whole system change has to be *'underpinned by multi-stakeholder analysis, experimental action, experiential learning and systematic inquiry'* (Burns, 2007). Similarly, Yoland Wadsworth identifies the act of inquiring as the dynamic of every living system; by *'inquiring full circle'* through observation, analysis, evaluative judgement, reflection and new theory-building, then further planning and *'experimenting'* in practice (Wadsworth, 2011). In other words, it's important to try things out and reflect, adapt and try again and to do this in an intelligent, inclusive and systematic way. There is a risk of being dismissive of analysis and of seeing this kind of attention to process as at odds with working with people or simply getting on with the job. But this is what working differently might look like and can hold the key to developing new knowledge and an adaptive, collaborative and improvisational skill-set, able to respond in new ways to systemic and complex problems on the ground. This takes us into more promising territory: a critical question is how to locate knowledge co-production or inquiry-based learning *and* action at the heart of policy-making and public services (Sharp, 2011).

Bridging the gap between knowing and doing
In case this sounds like a researcher saying *'let's have more research'*, consider what we know about the role of evidence in informing change. In many areas of public policy, there is, literally, a weight of evidence about 'what works'. Yet, that evidence *about* good practice is often failing to *become* good practice. Many public service systems are *'data-rich, but knowledge poor'* (Sharp, 2005). Even research enthusiasts cannot keep up with the volumes of reports, profiles and summaries. Some of this evidence makes its way into guidance, procedures and protocols and much of this store of knowledge remains unread and underused. It is too readily dismissed as fixed in time or location and detached from the real and messy world of practice. At other times, there's anxiousness to *'prove'* the efficacy of a particular intervention to justify funding. There have been countless evaluations of 'pilot' programmes, test sites or pathfinders although the programmes are rarely rolled out. Valuable resources have been spent on finding evidence of need and effectiveness, yet change seems to be stubborn and slow.

Wider debates about research use and impact have recognised the complexity and contingent nature of research use and suggest that research is more likely to be *'translated and transformed not simply transferred'* (Nutley, 2007). So whilst it's important not to oversimplify these debates, our ways of approaching the use and generation of evidence have certainly not served us well and have played their part in the problem. The way that research has conventionally been organised and commissioned has separated the users and producers of research rather than making it an *integrated learning process*. Future funding for evidence gathering is likely to be severely limited, but in any case, it is clear that there cannot be business as usual.

A 'knowledge co-production' approach values professional expertise alongside the knowledge that comes from personal experience; real transformative change comes from combining all kinds of expertise. This is a desirable and necessary response to the kind of complex situations and challenges that are faced and takes the agenda beyond 'service user involvement', which has often been important as a symbolic statement of organisational intent, but too commonly has left the underlying cultures undisturbed.

Locating research in action

So what might be done differently? Current debates about co-production have focused on service design and delivery and have neglected the implications of and for our ways of using and generating evidence. Research has traditionally been thought of as a way of defining problems and providing answers. Locating research in action can help people to learn to ask good questions, to listen, make collective sense of evidence and work out together what to do next. Crucially, it can be a way to keep doing all of this, to deal with the ever changing and complex situations in which we find ourselves.

Action research has been identified as a positive response to the challenges of moving research into practice. Yoland Wadsworth describes how research can provide evidence of the value and processes by which service systems can move towards a consumer-driven systemic logic – beyond the rhetoric of user involvement – and crucially can cut *'new and controversial ground'* in understandings about what consumers *can* contribute (Wadsworth, 2011, p. 209).   From elsewhere, the idea of service users as *'quality detectives'* is powerful (Bate, P and Robert, G , 2007, p. 1). Other valuable commentaries are available on the integration of research-into-practice; experience-based design is a user-focused design process with the goal of making user experience accessible to the designers, so that they can design experiences, rather than services (Bate, P and Robert, G , 2007, p. 9).

These kinds of integrated and continuous inquiry processes can breathe life into programmes and interventions, by creating space and time to talk to each other, ask good questions, work across boundaries and become more effective in our joint efforts. This is not always about starting from scratch: it can be about how best to adapt or customise evidence-based interventions or programmes (transferred from elsewhere) as well as providing new evidence of how things are working in the new context. There are many different possible approaches (Sharp, 2005, p. Annexes & Table 5.1). It may help to think of it like this: the point of research can be about *'talking to each other about what we ought to be doing'.*[4] Here there's an emphasis on dialogue, collaboration, purpose, values and action.   It's an approach to learning (and unlearning) that recognises that people learn best from 'doing', from trying things out and reflecting on the effects they create. They do this best in collaboration with others with a perspective to offer and a stake in the outcome.   This is a way of integrating planning, action, observation and reflection to ensure that inquiry-based learning and action are at the heart of the policy making process and the delivery of public services.

The basic principles of action research
There are some crucial and important differences to the conduct of conventional social science research and evaluation. Such a reflective, relational and emergent process also differs in important ways from conventional thinking about participatory research (which can still be research *about* action, rather than in action).   Whilst there is no single definition of action research and many approaches within the action research family, at its best, it is:

- *Contextually rooted and action focused:* it is rooted in the local particular context. Those most closely involved in the situation determine what is of importance. The focus is on trialling, testing and refining real outcomes.
- *Driven by purpose and values:* those most closely involved articulate the purpose and values of the inquiry process, including quality criteria by which the success and quality of the inquiry should be judged.
- *Appreciative:* It recognises strengths and assets as a starting point for inquiry, and builds resilience and capacity through the process.
- *Collaborative:* The inquiry is aligned with the critical interests of those most likely to benefit. Former 'research subjects' become active co-researchers. External specialists may have specific roles, but their perspectives are not privileged.

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[4] This is a paraphrase by Peter Reason of Richard Rorty, (1999) *Philosophy and social hope*. London: Penguin Books.

- *Inclusive of all kinds of knowing:* it draws on the particular experiences and 'knowing' of those most immersed in a particular situation. It recognises the importance of sharing knowledge and of creating the right climate for dialogue, so that differences in perspectives can be safely expressed and explored.
- *Emergent and open:* The main concern is to allow meaning and interpretation to evolve and change as the work proceeds. The focus of the inquiry can adapt to what emerges; the concern is not with prediction and control. There is interest in the unintended consequences of actions and openness to new information and understandings which challenge underlying assumptions. This can encourage greater awareness of the ways that people and organisations think that inhibit their capacity to act in congruence with their expressed purpose.
- *Real-time experimental:* it recognises that any well-grounded knowledge is always experimental 'working knowledge', adequate for the moment and open to further testing and refining. Learning and feedback is a continuous process. It may draw down 'propositional' knowledge from previous research and literature to test it out and generate new theories.

When are you ever not piloting?

There are examples that show that with the right structures and processes, it is possible to encourage an appetite to engage in all aspects of the 'evaluation' process because it is seen as directly relevant to the problems of daily practice (Burns, 2007) (Wadsworth, 2011) (Sharp, C and Jones, J with Humphreys, C and Netto, G, 2011). It is worth noting that the Magenta Book which provides Government guidance on evaluation in public policy proposes a number of situations when action research might prove particularly useful. (With my emphasis) these are when a *novel* way of working or delivering an intervention is being implemented; when a policy is based on a *new or unproven theory of change*; when there are a number of feasible *alternative options* for delivering a policy and it would be helpful to *test* them; or when a policy is being delivered in a *challenging implementation environment* (HM Treasury, 2011). In many contexts, it is hard to imagine situations where one or more of these conditions do not hold. Debates about evidence use and generation suggest it's worth asking *"When are you ever not 'piloting'?"* (Sharp, 2011a) Questions about how we should act and what difference we are making will always be with us.

Ten tips for getting started

These activities should involve people who use services or whom might be expected to do so, service managers, practitioners and research specialists.

Multi-stakeholder analysis
1. It is important to build inquiry in from the very earliest stages of thinking about an intervention or programme. Find an issue that matters, where there is a strong impetus to improve a social situation. Work out who 'we' are - those that have an initial 'stake' in the issues and how each see the situation. Be prepared to revise your initial view of who are the 'stakeholders'.
2. Create the right climate for inquiry from the start. Talk about values and purpose. Decide what your collective, shared or distinct views of success are likely to be and what, when you look back, will convince you that your efforts have been worthwhile.
3. Get a clear and strong commitment to the process from senior managers. It can be helpful to explicitly give 'permission' for people to experiment, without being prescriptive about exactly what they should do.

Experimental action
4. Treat your efforts as a pilot, experiment or some other term that conveys tentativeness and openness to alternative types of thinking, choice and action.

5. Start small. Find some enthusiasts and work with them; expand or grow the inquiry by building on early insights and themes. Link local inquiries up wherever possible to illuminate the lessons across a whole system, whether the organisation or community.

Experiential learning
6. Commit to and protect time out from routine activities for reflection on action.
7. Value the stories that people tell. Encourage them and find ways to make the telling, sharing and analysis of experience a routine part of the work. Make sense of them together and don't dismiss an isolated episode. Notice and explore puzzles, paradoxes or tensions.
8. Always think about what voices are missing and find ways to bring in other perspectives and ways to check out different views of 'reality'.

Systematic inquiry
9. Make use of existing opportunities and teams to build in an inquiry focus and supplement them with ways of bringing local teams and structures together to provide a bigger picture. Be prepared to be flexible and alter your approach as you learn.
10. Think about how to use external research specialists in more facilitative and advisory roles. For example, digesting literature, providing critical challenge, collecting or handling data, brokering, facilitation of group processes, or writing reports.

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