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Panel: The Rhetoric and Reality of “Knowledge Mobilization”: Perspectives from the Research Front

1. Summary of the Issue

Increasingly, researchers are beseeched, prodded and, at times, forced, to develop so-called “knowledge mobilization” (KM) plans and strategies as an integral part of their work, regardless, in some cases, of the appropriateness or utility of such activities for their research. Indeed, it seems that funders of research, especially government granting agencies, are now requiring that researchers justify why their work cannot be made to “add value” to “public” needs and priorities, rather than opting-in to such activities as and when appropriate.

These new imperatives, while difficult for many researchers across the spectrum of scholarly activity, may pose a particular challenge for some social science and humanities researchers, including those in library and information science (LIS) (LSE Public Policy Group, online). The proposed Panel will discuss the emerging issue of “knowledge mobilization”, problematizing the concept as articulated by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the primary research funding agency for LIS research in Canada. We hope to engage the audience in critical discussion of the potential benefits and harms of mandated knowledge mobilization requirements that increasingly emphasize communication to and with ‘knowledge users’ well outside the scope of traditional academic engagement.

2. Knowledge mobilization: What is it, and why now?

The panel will begin with Wathen presenting an overview of knowledge mobilization and closely related concepts from other research areas (e.g., knowledge translation, knowledge exchange, implementation science, commercialization, etc.), setting the context for a discussion of how SSHRC has defined it, how it has emerged as a discursive strategy for the Council’s new public face, and, of more direct relevance to established and emerging researchers, how this concept has become embedded in SSHRC’s recently re-structured funding programs and strategic priorities. The focus will be on material drawn from the SSHRC Strategic Plan and Funding Program policies and procedures (see Box 1).

Box 1: SSHRC Statements and Policies re: Knowledge Mobilization

Strategic Priority: Better connect social sciences and humanities research within and beyond academia, to maximize intellectual, cultural, social and economic impact.

“Knowledge mobilization” refers to a range of processes that help move research results into society, as well as bring new ideas into the world of research. From knowledge-brokering and outreach, to more effective dissemination through new technologies, to the “co-creation” of knowledge, these processes help ensure that public investments in social sciences and humanities research have the greatest possible impact—intellectually, socially and economically.

Source: [SSHRC Strategic Plan: Framing Our Direction, 2010-2012](#), online

Strategic Objectives re KM

- facilitate and enable the accessibility and impact of research by increasing and enhancing the flow of research knowledge among researchers, and between researchers and knowledge users;
- improve research connections by facilitating reciprocal relationships between researchers and knowledge users for the (co-)creation and use of research knowledge; and
- enhance the quality of knowledge mobilization by developing networks, tools and best practices.

Source: [SSHRC'S Knowledge Mobilization Strategy, 2009-11](#)

FAQ#7. The application forms now require applicants to provide a knowledge mobilization plan and a description of expected outcomes. What is the difference between these?

Knowledge mobilization plan: The knowledge mobilization plan will describe specific activities to engage with various audiences and participants (academic and/or non-academic) and to facilitate the multidirectional flow and exchange of research knowledge among them. It will also describe the timelines for undertaking these activities.

Description of expected outcomes: The description of expected outcomes will include the potential benefits of the proposed research and/or research-related activities. These benefits could include, for example, enhanced curriculum and teaching material, graduate student supervision, enriched public discourse, improved public policies, enhanced business strategies, and innovations in every sector of society.

Source: [Frequently Asked Questions about Program Architecture Renewal](#), online

3. Actors and roles in the knowledge production, sharing and use cycle

Following this “stage-setting”, Sibbald will introduce the actors and roles in this expanded notion of the knowledge production, sharing and use cycle, reviewing existing key theories and models drawn from various disciplines. A primary focus will be on “researcher-knowledge user partnerships” (Sibbald, 2010). She and Wathen will describe empirical data from ongoing and completed research (Wathen et al., 2011; Wathen et al., 2010) that highlights some of the barriers and facilitators to effective knowledge exchange, with a focus on methods and tools to

evaluate the impact of knowledge mobilization practices (and what this actually means), and key “lessons learned” from this research.

4. Tales from the front line: the new normal in writing SSHRC grants

Do knowledge mobilization imperatives affect how LIS researchers conceive and present their work? Stevenson will provide insight into this question by describing the influence of the new proposal requirements on her recent (successful) SSHRC application entitled “*New labour, new libraries: the changing nature of work in Canada's millennium public libraries*”. As a political economist who brings a neo-Marxist perspective to questions of relevance for LIS, and a scholar who employs techniques such as critical discourse analysis and comparative historical analysis, Stevenson will discuss how having to frame her proposal in response to the knowledge mobilization requirements influenced her choice of questions, approach, and the overall framing of the project. She will provide insight into the challenges of having to develop a KM plan for this project, but also the unanticipated benefits of having to think outside of her epistemological comfort zone.

Expanding on this theme, McKenzie will provide her perspective on the early impact of these new imperatives, drawing on her experience as a SSHRC-funded researcher, a grant reviewer, and a research administrator. In her role as Assistant Dean, Research at FIMS she has been responsible for helping researchers at FIMS (across multiple disciplines, including LIS) translate these new requirements into meaningful and appropriate text for grant proposals. In 2011 she served as a member, and in 2012 has been asked to Chair, the adjudication panel for SSHRC Insight Development grants covering Group 4: Sociology; demography; communication studies; journalism; media studies; gender studies; cultural studies; library and information science; and related fields. McKenzie’s experiences and insights should provide the opportunity for audience members to closely engage with the implications of these new requirements for their own current and future research.

Wathen will then provide a brief summary and Sibbald will serve as moderator for plenary discussion, which will be guided by key questions presented to audience members (see examples, below).

5. Proposed Panel Agenda

1. Knowledge mobilization: What is it, and why now? (Wathen)
 - Introduction and definition of key concepts
 - SSHRC’s articulation of KM
2. Actors and roles in the knowledge production, sharing and use cycle (Sibbald/Wathen)
 - “Researcher-Knowledge User Partnerships” – what are these and what does this really mean? How do we meaningfully assess ‘impact’ of KM activities?
 - Empirical data and emerging findings from recent and ongoing studies
3. Writing SSHRC grants: the new normal (Stevenson)
4. Perspectives from a research administrator (McKenzie)

5. Plenary discussion guiding questions, e.g.,

- What is driving funding agencies to completely re-think how they articulate the value of SSH research? What are the broader implications for curiosity-driven research? What is lost and what is gained? Who is defining “public value”? etc.
- Do knowledge mobilization imperatives affect how LIS researchers conceive and present their work?
- What are the implications of mandating partnerships with “knowledge users”?
- Do researchers have the skills and incentives to do good KM? What are the direct and indirect costs?

References

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