

Learning Days: a method of exchange between research and NHS practice

Gemma Spiers, Yvonne Birks, Gillian Parker

Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD

Email: gemma.spiers@york.ac.uk, yvonne.birks@york.ac.uk, gillian.parker@york.ac.uk

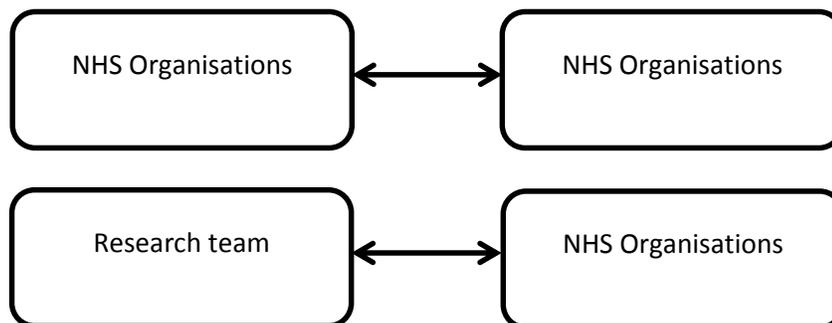
This paper describes the use of ‘learning days’; scheduled events between researchers and practice partners to exchange knowledge as part of an on-going research study taking place within the NHS. We discuss the objectives of the learning days, our experience so far, and the implications of these days for getting research into practice.

Objectives of the ‘learning days’

We are currently undertaking a study evaluating the reorganisation of children’s community nursing (CCN) services in the NHS. The NHS organisations taking part in the research are currently developing, or have recently developed, CCN services. As part of developing this research, we have incorporated five ‘learning days’ into the project. The primary objective is to facilitate meaningful knowledge exchange in two ways (see figure 1).

First, we anticipate knowledge exchange between the NHS partner organisations taking part in the research, to share good practice and experiences of developing similar services. As each NHS locale taking part in the research is at a different stage in their service reorganisation, this presents a good opportunity for this type of shared learning. Second, we anticipate knowledge exchange between the research team and the NHS partner organisations, to feedback emerging findings of the evaluation and gain the perspective of our partners on these. We expect such knowledge exchange to be valuable to the NHS organisations as they reorganise their services.

Fig. 1. Two-way knowledge exchange



A secondary objective of the learning days is to develop service tools relevant to NHS practice.

Our experience so far

We have undertaken two of the five scheduled learning days. These are full day events, attended by members of the research team and NHS representatives from our research sites. At the first learning day, there was an emphasis on sharing practice and experience of developing services between attendees. It also provided a useful opportunity to talk in-depth about the research with the NHS representatives. Feedback on service tools we are developing as part of the research was also sought. At the second learning day, we continued with the discourse of sharing practice, sought further feedback on the tools and trialled those we had developed from feedback at the first day.

Our experience of the two learning days that have so far taken place suggest there are both benefits and challenges to this method of exchange.

Benefits

Three main benefits are apparent. First, the learning days appear to be useful forums for sharing practice and experiences between NHS organisations that would otherwise not be in contact. Across the two days there was much discussion between the NHS representatives about their experiences of developing services. Initial feedback from the first day was positive, and following the second day, NHS representatives were keen to maintain contact for continued practice sharing.

Second, although not an intention of the learning days, we suspect the days have maintained partner engagement in the research. This in turn has enabled us to build relationships with our partners, which in the long-term may facilitate future dissemination of findings. Third, the days appear to be developing a 'legitimacy' with our partners, and we suspect that in this process, we are creating a forum for future knowledge exchange.

Challenges

Despite the apparent benefits, there are challenges and some limitations.

First, some of the representatives attending the first day were unable to continue their involvement at the second day due to job changes or heavy workloads. Thus, there has been some discontinuity in attendance. Second, we have been unable to share emerging findings so early in the research. We are planning to share the first set of findings at the next learning day (expected March 2014). Third, group dynamics can pose a challenge and need to be carefully managed.

Implications for getting research into practice

While current information in relation to feeding back emerging findings to NHS partners is limited, the learning days so far have enabled us to build relationships with our NHS partners, which in turn could facilitate dissemination of findings. If the learning days are successful for knowledge exchange between the researchers and NHS partners, it will mean that findings can be integrated into practice as soon as they become available, via the individuals in the NHS best placed to use them. Possible ways to improve the use of learning days in future projects include scheduling more days later in the project when there are findings to disseminate, and making days shorter to make it easier for those with busier workloads to attend.