This article describes Journal Watch, a monthly lunchtime discussion group of faculty, staff and graduate students from the University of Toronto, McGill University and the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW) in Canada. The group searches journals each month for empirical research on child welfare, which are reviewed during monthly videoconferences. Short reviews of exceptional articles are shared in both English and French with the broader community of child welfare researchers and practitioners across Canada through CECW’s electronic newsletter. Journal Watch provides a broad overview of the emerging published research in child welfare, translates and disseminates this research to a broad audience, and trains new scholars in critical thinking. Two years after formation, the group is operating sustainably and there is a demand among Canadian child welfare practitioners for Journal Watch’s succinct reviews.

Keywords: Knowledge Transfer; Communication; Computer and Information Technology; Research Training; Higher Education; Collaborative Learning; Literature Review; Child Welfare

Introduction

This article describes an innovative knowledge-sharing and knowledge-building forum that uses videoconferencing and Internet technology to facilitate critical discussion of child welfare research among faculty and graduate students at two Canadian universities. Journal Watch is a monthly lunchtime discussion group of faculty, staff and graduate students from the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, McGill University’s Centre for Research on Children and Families, and the University of Toronto-based Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW). The two universities, based 500 km apart in Toronto and Montreal, Canada,
convene using videoconferencing technology to discuss, appraise and report on current articles pertaining to child welfare topics. Members of Journal Watch increase their awareness of child welfare research trends and build analytical skills through critical analysis of substantive research. The child welfare literature is scanned each month to pick up the latest research results and to discern which articles have both rigorous methodology and results with important implications to child welfare work in Canada. The group collaborates to produce short reviews of these exceptional articles in both English and French which are sent out to the broader community of child welfare researchers and practitioners across Canada through the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare’s electronic dissemination mechanisms. The process has been developing over two years and is so successful that there is now a demand among child welfare practitioners for the short reviews of important research that the group produces.

This article describes the process used by the Journal Watch group, as well as the way in which it has developed and operationalized its processes.

Collaborative Reviewing as a Method of Seeking an Overview of Research

The electronic information age has seen the social sciences, along with all other disciplines, experience a rapid rise in the volume of information generated. The move towards evidence-based practice in social work and related fields, in particular, is rapidly expanding as are the number and proportion of articles using rigorous research designs (Shlonsky and Gibbs, 2004). The challenge for academics is to sift through the barrage of new research and critically appraise it for quality and content. Knowledge transfer organizations, such as the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare in Canada, have an equivalent and parallel challenge in searching out the most important and most reliably conducted research, and transmitting this new knowledge swiftly and succinctly to the field so that policymakers and social workers in practice settings can access and act on it.

Searching out and evaluating new knowledge in child welfare takes time and resources. The sheer quantity of information published in peer-reviewed journals alone points to a need for researchers to develop collaborative processes, such as working groups, to regularly filter the literature in order to keep on top of emerging trends and identify gaps in current knowledge. Other forms of search and synthesis are not designed for scholars to stay abreast of the literature as it emerges. Highly rigorous systematic reviews of the literature, such as those produced by the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations, can often take years to complete and are generally updated only every three years. Even less rigorous and time-intensive methods, such as Rapid Evidence Assessments (Davies, 2004; Deaton and Davies, 2005), are question-specific and do not focus on the field as a whole.

The rationale for the formation of the Journal Watch came from an idea developed by two social work faculty members, one based at the University of Toronto and the other based at McGill University in Montreal, to develop a collaborative communication network, linked by videoconferencing technology, for seeking out, critically appraising,
and sharing information on emerging child welfare research. The Journal Watch approach to literature reviewing, while not systematic in the traditional sense, is methodical. It provides a broad overview of the emerging published research in child welfare, translates this into Canada’s two official languages, disseminates it to a broad audience, and trains new scholars in critical thinking.

Using Distance Learning Technology to Build Knowledge

Within and between the research cultures of large universities, new technologies for videoconferencing and sharing information electronically have created possibilities for collaborative working groups between faculty members. Such associations have the potential to produce highly symbiotic benefits, especially with respect to the efficient generation of information used to build new knowledge. One of the benefits of collaborative learning is that the interaction of individuals within working groups allows for the kind of critical dialogue that leads to the development of new ideas. Studies on how scientists collaborate to develop meaningful new theories have shown that scientific collaboration shares many of the features of everyday, informal interaction, such as the use of conversational turn-taking and metaphors to negotiate meaning, and that learning in such situations can produce conceptual changes—in effect, deep learning that can push the forefront of thought and move from knowledge transfer to transformation (Roschelle, 1996, pp. 209–248). A discussion-based working group that regularly reviews the literature, such as Journal Watch, creates a place and time for socially mediated critical thought and learning within a community of scholars. The forum accomplishes multiple educative purposes that go far beyond the simple objective of keeping abreast of the literature. Specifically, the inclusion of graduate students in the collaborative network facilitates the development of critical thinking and content expertise in the next generation of scholars.

The model adopted by Journal Watch, in which faculty, research associates, and graduate students gather to discuss the new literature on child welfare, can be described using the terminology of Scardamalia and Bereiter (1996, pp. 249–268) as centralized, open knowledge building with a focus on collective knowledge. Centralization occurs through the moderation of the two lead faculty members, who manage the discourse on the merits and drawbacks of each journal article presented by group members. Critical inquiry is modelled using Socratic techniques and other forms of critical exploration. The use of videoconferencing technology allows the groups in Montreal and Toronto to see and speak with each other in real time, allowing for immediacy, spontaneity and ease of conversation. Knowledge is built as the researchers and students discuss the advances of others, with a continual interplay of findings and shared expertise among students, staff, and faculty members working at the forefront of their fields. Knowledge is not only passed from the faculty experts to the less seasoned scholars in the group, but is shared interactively between group members so that new understandings can emerge. In this way, critical discussion of journal articles is a platform for the kind of discourse that can become the driving force in the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and even the advancement of knowledge.
The Journal Watch model also supports a publication process in that, if a particular article is felt to be of outstanding quality or has substantial Canadian policy implications, the participant who originally reviewed the article writes a short, three or four paragraph synopsis (called a ‘full review’), which is then disseminated across Canada via the CECW’s monthly e-newsletter (‘CECW Research Watch’). Through this mechanism, graduate students have the opportunity to increase their publication records and to bring their names to the attention of the research and practice community. The e-newsletter recipients, who are largely policymakers, researchers and child welfare practitioners, also benefit from having fast, highly concise synopses of some of the most important and current research in child welfare.

Journal Watch’s objectives are:

(a) to enhance knowledge transfer and critical thought by:
   - keeping faculty, staff and students updated with respect to the literature;
   - teaching graduate students how to read, summarize and appraise research;
   - modelling how to have a short, critical dialogue about evidence and its use in a practice and policy context;
   - increasing capacity within the research community for critical inquiry;
   - developing a community of child welfare scholars by bringing the two universities together;
(b) to bring important new research findings to the attention of child welfare researchers, practitioners and policymakers in Canada;
(c) to enhance CECW’s visibility, increase its number of products, and expand its network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners by providing them with a valuable service; and
(d) to generate publication opportunities for graduate students.

Inter-University Partnership

The mainstays of Journal Watch are two faculty members specializing in child welfare, one at McGill University and the other at the University of Toronto, as well as with two research associates working for CECW as communications specialists. One research associate is located at CECW’s University of Toronto site and one is located at CECW’s McGill University site at the Centre for Research on Children and Families. The monthly meetings are anchored by the two faculty leaders with the research associates on hand to support. The research associate from the University of Toronto site searches major social work journals each month, develops the reading list, and distributes it by email to the participants two weeks in advance of the meetings. The research associate from McGill University maintains a Journal Watch website, which is open only to participants, and posts a link to each journal article under the name of the person assigned to it.

As of July 2008, there were 23 participants in the club: 13 participants at the Toronto site, consisting of three faculty members, seven doctoral candidates and three research...
associates, as well as 10 participants at the Montreal site, consisting of three faculty members, six doctoral students and one research associate.

Compilation of Articles for Review

Peer-reviewed journals are searched monthly for empirical articles pertaining to child welfare. Each article is categorized into a general topic area as indicated in Table 1. The list of each month's new articles is sent out by email to participants two weeks in advance of each meeting. Participants are given a window of 24 hours in which to request articles of particular interest to them, which are then assigned on a first-come, first-served basis, with an attempt being made to match the article to the reader's pre-specified areas of interest. The reading list is then posted on the Journal Watch website, with links to the articles under the name of each participant for easy retrieval.

Participants review articles prior to the meeting and decide whether they are of sufficient quality and interest to merit discussion.

Meetings

Meetings are held simultaneously at the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and at McGill University. Polycom® videoconferencing technology allows the groups at each site to see each other and talk in real time.

Meetings are held monthly over lunch. The two faculty leaders at each location model a process of critical inquiry whereby each article is appraised for the rigour of its methodology and the significance of the findings in relation to the overall body of knowledge. Verbal presentations are expected to be very short, one to two minutes at most. If a reviewer has found an article that he or she feels is of exceptional quality, it can be brought to the group for a longer discussion with a recommendation for dissemination into the broader community of researchers, policymakers and practitioners. In this case, the article is analysed in more detail, with the methodology scrutinized and the implication of the study findings within a Canadian context being debated within the group. The decision as to whether the article merits being brought forward to become a full review for dissemination is made by the group in a collaborative manner, moderated by the faculty leaders.

Determination and Dissemination of Exceptional Articles

If an exceptional article is found, the participant who found it develops a three paragraph summary (called a ‘full review’) of the research. Full reviews consist of original critical thought, and are not copies of the abstract. They are written in plain language and are normally not more than 600 words long. A heading with the ‘take-away’ message is developed for use as the subject header in the dissemination e-newsletter. All reviews are edited by the faculty leaders to ensure that they are reliable and accurate appraisals of the literature.
Table 1  Journal Watch Child Welfare Topic Subdivisions

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<th>Maltreatment</th>
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<td>Neglect</td>
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<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>Foster care, kinship care, adoption</td>
<td>Meta analyses &amp; systematic reviews</td>
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<td>Physical abuse, injuries &amp;</td>
<td>Child development &amp;</td>
<td>Immigration &amp; refugees</td>
<td>Group care &amp; residential treatment</td>
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<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>Disabilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional maltreatment</td>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Family preservation/mediation/family group conferencing</td>
<td>Experimental &amp; quasi-experimental</td>
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<td>Exposure to domestic violence</td>
<td>Juvenile crime/delinquency</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
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Organizing and disseminating the full reviews is the responsibility of the research associates. After translation, both the Toronto site and the McGill site work together to disseminate the full reviews via CECW’s national electronic newsgroup of more than 1,600 people.

After the full reviews are sent out as Research Watch e-newsletters, they are archived on CECW’s website (http://www.cecw-cepb.ca/) so that past issues can be accessed by the public at no charge. After two years of operation, a total of 23 full reviews have been compiled; the growing archive increasingly becomes a valuable base of information for scholarship and evidence-based practice in child welfare.

Discussion: Knowledge Transfer of Empirical Research in Social Work

The concept of clinical effectiveness through knowledge of current best evidence (Swinkels et al., 2006) is very current now in the social sciences, having started in the medical sciences. Journal Watch’s sponsor and publisher, CECW, is connected to two strong research centres of evidence-based social work practice: the Research Institute for Evidence-Based Social Work at the University of Toronto’s Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, and McGill University’s School of Social Work’s Centre for Research on Children and Families. The mission of each of these organizations is to put the best research evidence into the hands of practitioners and policymakers in the field.

As in many areas of social work, child welfare is at an early stage in developing a body of research literature, and evidence-based practice is a relatively new phenomenon (Regehr et al., 2007). Communication channels between research institutions and community-based child welfare organizations are few and far between. CECW and the organizations with which it is affiliated aim to develop the capacity for evidence-based practice by communicating new child welfare knowledge to policymakers and the community agencies that work with children and families in Canada.

CECW’s monthly Research Watch e-newsletter, which distributes Journal Watch’s rapid review synopses, models itself after other similar electronic publications in the field of medical science. For example, the publishers of New England Journal of Medicine publish an electronic bulletin, called Journal Watch, as well as Physician’s First Watch, a daily email update on the most important medical news to practising physicians and their patients. In Australia, the NSW Department of Community Services’ Research to Practice team produces a similar product, a web-based compendium of short summaries of recent research, entitled ‘DoCS Research to Practice Update’.

In sponsoring the Journal Watch rapid review process, the organizations involved engage in both knowledge transfer and knowledge transformation. Knowledge transfer occurs through dissemination of rapid reviews in monthly Research Watch e-newsletters. Knowledge transformation takes place as policymakers and practitioners use the information they glean from the research evidence in the reviews as a foundation for making evidence-informed policy or practice changes.
Benefits and Challenges for Participants

Since Journal Watch is entirely voluntary, rewards are intrinsic. It offers participants a chance to gather together with a community of scholars in the same field while discussing the latest research findings in an informal setting. Participants benefit from having exposure to one another’s expertise in various fields, and from exercising skills of critical inquiry as they delve into substantive debates. Journal Watch also imposes a disciplined professionalism on its participants to maintain awareness of the issues and findings appearing in the most recent journal publications in their fields. Those who write the short synopses published in the Research Watch e-newsletter also benefit from having publication opportunities.

Motivating participants to carry out their monthly reading and reviewing of articles during times when their workload is heavy can present difficulties. We have found that participants appreciate the opportunity to select the articles they will review, hence the establishment of a ‘24-hour first-call, first-served’ protocol prior to assigning articles. Flexibility in expectations of attendance is also important. If members are not able to attend a meeting, their articles are carried over to the next month, and relatively few new articles, if any, are added on. This flexibility reduces the problems of overburdening participants. A certain amount of absenteeism happens each month as part of the normal course of events. Lack of participation that extends for several months will usually be accompanied by a communication on the part of the participant as to the reason for the absence, and sometimes the participant will decide to leave the group entirely. The doctoral students who have been involved with Journal Watch have shown more continuity than the Masters level students, which is to be expected since they are students for longer periods of time and are generally more equipped for involvement in methodological debates.

Conclusion

Over the two years that it has been running, Journal Watch has proven itself to be a sustainable process with a number of benefits for its members at the two universities. In addition to its usefulness to the academy, the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare benefits from Journal Watch’s regular production of rapid, high quality reviews of important research for dissemination to the profession and the general public. The relative efficiency of the process, the stability of participants’ attendance over time, and the very positive responses received over the years from the e-newsletter audience, attest to the strength of this collaborative model of e-learning. For the faculty members and graduate students involved, it is a very efficient way of keeping on top of the literature.

References


