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Abstract

This paper affirms best practice as a long standing approach to FCS and introduces next practice as a new approach. While respecting the value of current best practice (previous innovations), next practice is a context-sensitive, vanguard approach to innovate for the future. A three-phase next practice innovation model is presented, including stimulating, incubating and accelerating practitioner-led innovations. Moving from reflection by leading-edge practitioners through focused local action to professional-wide adoption, next practice innovations ensure a powerful way to future-proof the profession and keep it viable, vital and relevant.

Next Practice Innovations in Family and Consumer Sciences

This paper affirms best practice as a long standing approach to family and consumer sciences (FCS) and introduces *next practice*, a new approach developed within the last decade. Pendergast urges us to future proof the profession, meaning we “anticipate future developments to minimize negative impacts and optimize opportunities” (2009, p.517), always to ensure relevancy, viability and vitality. Best practices (current ways of doing things) may not be the *best* way to ensure our future (pun intended). Innovations may be the best way forward.

Innovations

Whereas best practice focuses on the now (current times), next practice focuses on the future, and strives to figure out how things can be done more powerfully (Innovation Unit, 2010). Best practice focuses on past innovations while next practice focuses on future innovations. Innovate is Latin *innovatus*, to renew or change (Harper, 2010). Hannon (2007) explained that professionals (and FCS are no exception) must assume an outward-facing disposition; they must remain aware of innovations emerging in other fields, be alert to developments outside their zone of operation or comfort, developments that offer improvement potential for the profession.

Innovations can be understood in terms of their depth (minor to major change and transformation) and their scope (near to or far from existing practice). Furthermore, incremental changes comprise minor adaptations within the current paradigm and radical innovations challenge the existing best practice paradigm leading to major changes and transformations - next practices. Radical innovations (far from existing practice) also are characterized as discontinuous, featuring gaps and intervals, instead of being incremental, increasing gradually in regular degrees. Radical, practitioner-led innovations are often followed by incremental innovations; next practice entails high-leverage change followed by system-wide implementation (Hargreaves, 2003).

Embarking on radical innovations requires practitioners to have confidence based on their secure reputation. They must be secure in themselves as well because radical innovations are first met with ridicule, then strong opposition until the outcomes from the innovation become self-evident and accepted (Hannon, 2007). The next section discusses best practice (currently favoured, previous innovations), followed by next practice, innovations for the future.

Best Practice

Most of us in the field of FCS are familiar with the concept of best practice. In 2011, the New Zealand Qualification Authority held a series of “*best practice* workshops for home economics teachers to improve understanding of national standards through the use of student exemplars” (p.1, emphasis

added). In the United States, the Family and Consumer Sciences Best Practice (2010) organization strives to “improve lessons in FCS by sharing *best practices* in our curriculum” (web citation). McGetterick (2010), writing about the proposed changes to the home economics curriculum in Ireland, asked the government to “ensure that Home Economics is mandatory for all students in the Junior Cycle of the future following *best practice* in other countries” (pp. 3-4, emphasis added).

In 2008, a report about home economics in Irish schools was prepared with “the intent to be a resource for teachers, school authorities and policy-makers and aims to promote *best practice* in teaching and learning in Home Economics” (Department of Education and Science, 2008, p.2, emphasis added). In 2003, the Manitoba Department of Education and Youth (Canada) published a “renewal document [intended] to reshape and restructure the current Home Economics and Industrial Arts programming to reflect *best practice* to better meet the needs of the Middle Years student” (p.1, emphasis added).

Best Practice Defined

Best is Old English *betst*, first. Practice is Latin *practicare*, to do or to perform (Harper, 2010). Best practice refers to the replication of a practice that is preformed in a superior way and is deemed to be of a higher quality than alternate practices and known alternatives (Szulanski, 1996). Best practices tend to rely on old thinking (received wisdom); best practices continue to deal with old problems, and often with new problems, which really require innovation.

Best practices deliver tried-and-tested solutions to known problems (Szulanski, 1996). They reflect accumulated, reusable patterns and components, tools and platforms (Next Practice Research Institute, 2011), as well as curricula content, precise techniques, and methodological strategies (Peters & Heron, 1993). Practitioners tend to be heavily invested in their already successful approaches and are keen to have their known good practices be effectively disseminated and for ineffective practices to be discontinued (Hannon, 2007).

Why Best Practice

Best practice is encouraged for several pragmatic reasons. It identifies the *best* way of doing something in contrast to an inferior or less effective approach. It prevents people from having to reinvent the wheel, and it gets more practitioners to use the best way (Duignan, 2009). Best practices also can be conceived as promising or exemplary practice, often recommended by experts or leaders in a field (Peters & Heron, 1993). Best practices are intended to help practitioners who wish to improve the quality of their service (Edge & Richards, 1998; Peters & Heron, 1993). As well, best practice guidelines may serve to heighten service providers’ awareness of the need for changes to continually ensure appropriate, effective and constructive practice. Best practice also is a vehicle by which research can be translated into a form that meets the needs of practitioners, policy makers and pre- and in-service training agendas (Peters & Heron, 1993; Szulanski, 1996).

Assumptions of Best Practice

Although there remains a lack of consensus about what exactly is meant by the term best practice (Duignan, 2009; Peters & Herin, 1993), there is agreement on the assumptions behind the approach and the process involved. The best practice approach assumes there exists, at any one point in time, *a best way* (the most excellent or desirable) of achieving clearly identifiable ends and that this best way can be made generally available to others (Edge & Richards, 1998). With proper processes, checks and balances, a desired outcome can be achieved more effectively with fewer problems and unforeseen complications (“Best Practice”, 2011). Through a process of the discovery of a new and more effective way of doing things, the dissemination of this approach and resultant changes in current practice, best practices are identified, communicated and implemented (Edge & Richards).

Critique of Best Practice

There is a lively critique of the notion of best practice. It is faulted for: being contingent on a given value system or ideology, not knowing which best is really the best, and creating a bandwagon effect. Best practices are not always transferable to all contexts and are not best for all clients or those receiving the practitioners’ service. They are critiqued for intimating the practice has been thoroughly researched and validated, for not being grounded in theory, and for removing the agency and political

voice of practitioners and/or clients (Duignan, 2009; Edge & Richards, 1998; Peters & Heron, 1993). Pertinent to the main thesis of this paper, best practice focuses on the here and *now* and asks, “What works?” instead of on the future and on what could be done better, the purview of next practice (Hannon, 2007).

Next Practice

The Innovation Unit in England played a key role in developing the concept of next practice (Hannon, 2007). They presented their idea at the 2009 American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference in San Diego (MacKay, Hannon, Jackson & Earl, 2009). Next practice “is keenly aware of conventional best practice, understands the strengths and limitations of current best practice and aspires to move to a new level” (p.3). Moving to this new level may disrupt, evolve or revolutionize current best practice (Hargreaves, 2003; MacKay et al.). Asking the question, “What comes next?” orients us to the future not just the present, mitigating any inclination to hold onto comfortable, established approaches to practice. This is a good thing because being *the best* at a particular thing may not be what we need *next*.

Features of Next Practice

Prahalad (2004) explained that next practice has three features: (a) it is future-oriented, (b) it does not assume that any single entity is an exemplar of everything that could happen, and (c) it is about connecting the dots by amplifying the weak signals. Next practice is informed by a critical scanning of the larger environment and is directed at serious, contemporary problems. It is a user-focused approach to stimulating, incubating and accelerating innovation. This three-phase process is strongly driven by the needs of those who will use the innovation (users’ needs) (Hannon, 2007). The next practice approach involves an open-ended investigation of the nature of an intractable problem, striving for breakthrough thinking and solutions.

Identifying Next Practice

Systematically identifying next practices is not easy. Fortunately, two truths prevail. First, next practice, innovation missionaries are most likely to appear where the need is most acute. They are the lead users who are already ahead of the field, on the crest of the next wave. Second, these people, innovators with expertise in given areas, are likely to be the best conduits of information about the pioneers they respect (Bentley & Gillinson, 2007).

As mentioned before, the next practice approach entails stimulating, incubating and accelerating innovations. The Innovation Unit has developed a three phase process for anyone wishing to engage in next practice. The process moves from self-reflection and outreach by the system initiating the next practice, to focused action at the local level, followed by wider system learning and development, respectively: stimulating, incubating and accelerating next practice (Hannon, 2007). Figure One shares an adaptation of this model for family and consumer sciences (and home economics, human ecology and human sciences).

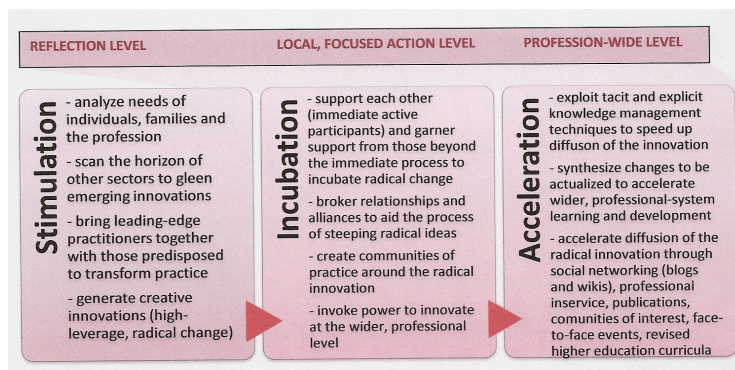


Figure 1 Next Practice Innovation Model (adapted from Hannon, 2007)

Assumptions of Next Practice

Just as best practice was based on a set of assumptions, so is next practice. First, it is assumed that next practice, which will have system-wide significance, will emerge from a “combination of a methodology... with a mobilised group of empowered practitioners motivated by a compelling purpose” (Hannon, 2007, p. 9). Second, next practice assumes the right group to work with will be drawn from those practitioners already pushing the boundaries of current practice. They will be conscious of the limits of current best practice and appreciate the need to push further, or in new directions. Moreover, their ideas spring from immersion in practice, not in theory or ideology (Hannon), although they hold a deep respect for the role of the latter in problematizing contemporary issues. They have a wide field of vision, a lively interest in the overall direction of the service in which they work, and they are constantly scanning their environment. These “system-aware practitioners [use] a pull instead of a push approach” to innovation (p.9).

Nature of Next Practitioners

Next practitioners seek to build on the best by knowing what best or good are and by having the will to take this knowledge to the next level. They are eager to take risks in partnership with others to achieve breakthroughs. They are able to suspend existing assumptions, models and procedures (those best practices), pushing their thinking beyond known thresholds. They are comfortable being shielded from dominant logic and established procedures (Brugmann, 2009; MacKay et al., 2009). “Next practices – emergent innovations that could open up new ways of working – are much more likely to come from thoughtful, experienced, self-confident practitioners trying to find new and more effective solutions to intractable problems” (Improvement and Development Agency, 2006, pp. 3-4). Next practitioners are creatively rigorous and rigorously creative. They are reflective and self-critical, analytical and able to synthesize (Next Practice Research Institute, 2011).

What’s Next?

Best practice asks, “What works?” Next practice asks, “What could work better and more powerfully?” While respecting the value of best practice, next practice is a context-sensitive, adaptive, user-generated approach to the future (Hannon, 2007). The next practice approach to innovations within the FCS academic discipline and profession warrants further consideration by FCS leaders. We will need innovative, outside-the-box, boundary-pushing approaches to practice in the 21st century. McGregor (2009) identified several philosophical next practice innovations from home economists around the world. Others could innovate next practice in areas related to policy; higher education, public school and non-formal curricula; research methodologies and methods; theories, concepts and conceptual frameworks; bodies of knowledge; professional competencies and processes; and the like. Shifting our focus from best practice to next practice is a natural and vanguard progression in our approach to working with and for families, and is a viable means of future-proofing the profession.

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