



## Report on the 2009 AES Conference

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### Overview

The AES conference this year was held in Canberra at the National Convention Centre which hosted well over 400 delegates. The opening address was given by Dr. Jenny Neale current president of the society. Welcome to country was performed by Mrs Agnes Shea OAM, a Nunawall Elder.

This year I felt that the presentations had increased in quality over previous years and there was a lot of new and innovative material presented. I think this may have been partly due to the theme of the conference which was evidence and evaluation, and this theme may have caused delegates to think a little more critically when crafting presentations. The conference had six specific streams including health, education, environment, international development, social and community programs, corporate and performance measurement in addition to a seventh “general” stream. My focus was specifically on health and international development. Space does not permit a comprehensive description of all the presentations I attended so what follows is a description of some of what I regard as key material.

### Summary of key presentations

Two of the four keynote addresses were highlights of the conference The first of these was given by the past president of the American Evaluation Association William Trochim, who holds a number of prestigious positions including Professor of Policy Analysis and Management at Cornell University started by posing the question “how do we know what we know?” before examining the origins of the “evidence movement” and exploring the question “what constitutes

evidence?” He viewed evidence as “synthesized empirical knowledge’ and described an evidence continuum with experimentation, epitomized by the RCT on one end and a “methodological, pluralist, pragmatist” position equating to a more qualitative approach to evidence collection. This label became a buzz word during the conference as many presenters declared themselves “methodological, pluralist, pragmatists” prior to starting their presentation. His final point was that the evaluation community needs to develop its own evidence base and can learn much from the evidence base movement as developed in the health arena

The second address of note was given by Dr. Philip Davies the Executive Director of a UK evidence and policy research consultancy, and formerly Deputy Director of the Government Social Research Unit of UK Cabinet Office. Dr. Davies examined the question “why we need evidence based policy?” and explored the different notions of evidence as seen by researchers on the one hand and policy makers on the other. He explored a list of sources of evidence used by UK civil servants noting that academic research did not feature on the list. He finally noted that evidence based policy is no substitute for thinking based policy and for evidence to be incorporated into policy it was important for the policy person to own the evidence.

The conference had a strong element of program theory and a number of presentations focused on the use of logic models and program logic in evaluation which is fundamentally important to any successful evaluation. Kate Averill for example demonstrated the use of a logic model to develop an evaluation of the Australia Papua New Guinea Incentive Fund (APNGIF). This fund helps local organizations to participate in national development. There are some 39 programs administered by 33 agencies over 50 provinces.

Hannah Carlson examined the problem of dealing with the evaluation of a program where program theory is either non existent or has been poorly designed by the client. Here she developed the concept of Program Theory Reconstruction (PTC) as a relatively quick and inexpensive approach to creating a workable program theory when time and budget constraints preclude other approaches. The logic is developed through a series of stakeholder interviews by examining the problem they are addressing and approach to solution via cause and effect logic.

Addressing similar problems from a different perspective Dr. Darrel Caulley presented an analysis of causation in qualitative analysis taking a critical realist approach utilizing the concept of “powers and mechanisms” and Scriven (1975) Modus Operandi Method. The objective of this method is to construct a causal pathway between the program and the effects to determine if the program is responsible from the effects we observe. This method is of use when the logic framework is weak or non existent in the program being evaluated.

Dr. Ian Scales a consultant Anthropologist provided an interesting analysis of market chain/transport initiatives in post conflict Bougainville using a spacio ethnographic methodology. By examining the effect of the programs with respect to their geographic and socio economic distribution he was able to reveal the programs uneven effect.

Another underlying theme of the conference was the notion of what constitutes evidence? This centred around the RCT vs qualitative and empirical data debate. While RCTs were acknowledged as the gold standard in experimental science, when dealing with evaluation they were on the whole inappropriate for many reasons, including time, cost and ethical consideration when evaluating against a counterfactual. A number of presentations addressed quality of evidence. Associate Professor Barbara Pamphilon of Canberra University described a systematic way of using anecdotal evidence “in an ongoing theory building process” to add “deeper understanding of the program achievements beyond the more readily measureable outputs”. This was done by systematic analysis of underlying meanings in the anecdotes and how these relate to themes in the program or intervention to which they relate.

#### Conclusion and take home messages

Overall this was a very informative and useful conference presenting valuable lessons in evaluation across a broad range of disciplines. The major take home messages are:

1. The evaluation community should take note of the evidence base movement and develop its own evidence based culture.
2. Sound program logic underpins good evaluation and systematic methods should be used to reconstruct a logic model by the evaluator when this is lacking or poorly developed in the original program.

Finally I would like to thank Elena DiBez and the PHCRED Tri State Program for sponsoring my attendance at this conference.