OPEN Quick Guide: Client Experience

Program design and development

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This OPEN Quick Guide provides a useful overview of how to keep clients, with their unique values, preferences and experiences, at the centre of program design and development.

What

Client experience is one of the three cornerstones of evidence informed practice. It includes actively pursuing and drawing on the unique views, concerns and expectations of a person or group of people utilising or participating in a service.

Evidence informed practice – incorporating the best available research with client values and practitioner expertise.

From a program perspective, client experience is a key ingredient for:

- identifying the issues that a service should tackle

- designing an appropriate service response

- a genuine evaluation of what makes a service effective or not.

While research and practice expertise are also critical ingredients, discounting client experience can lead to false assumptions and unrealised outcomes.[1]

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[1] Moore, T.G. (2016). Towards a model of evidence-informed decision-making and service delivery. CCCH Working paper No. 5. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

How

Approaches to integrate client experience in program design and development are often labelled as 'participatory', 'co-design' or even 'creative'. Labels aside, essentially, the methods and approaches you choose ought to depend on where you are in a program cycle (e.g. planning, implementation, evaluation) and your client, community and cultural needs and context.

For example, The ARP Net Dilly Bag is a toolbox of participatory methods for research and evaluation designed with and for Indigenous people in the Top End of the Northern Territory and the Community Toolbox shares advice for how to ensure that everyone who has a stake in a program or service is included in the planning stage, see Participatory Approaches to Planning.

Guiding Principles

Integrating client experience in evidence-informed practice means creating the time and space for genuine collaboration in decision-making. To do this, it helps to apply some key principles, working in a way that is:

- **Respectful.** Respect is the foundation of participatory practice. Genuine respect begins with valuing others' knowledge, ideas and experiences, particularly when they may differ from your own.[2]

- **Equitable.** Creating spaces for genuine participation and joint decision making with people that are often excluded or disenfranchised from such processes.

- **Transparent.** Be open and honest about what the process involves and how information will be used. Setting up for success and building trust with a shared understanding of expectations.

- **Ethical.** Focussing on the benefits to the client and community, and minimising the risk of harm. Understanding the sensitive nature of client and community experiences, consent must be obtained from all participants and their confidentiality protected.[3]

- **Outcomes focussed.** This is not a symbolic exercise or a 'tick box'. Focusing on outcomes and the unique values, preferences and needs of our clients should lead to sustainable solutions. Solutions can then be tested drawing on participant feedback to determine where adjustments might be needed.[4]

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[2] NSW Council of Social Services (2017). Principles of Codesign, accessed December 2018,<www.ncoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/resources/Codesign%20principles.pdf >
[3] National Health and Medical Research Council (2007) The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research-updated 2018, accessed January 2019 < https://nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018>
[4] NSW Council of Social Services, op.cit.

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Considerations

Here are some useful tools to get started and think creatively about the role of client experience in program design and development:

What level of participation should I be aiming for?	This depends on a number of factors, including the preferences of your client group, organisational resources and the stage of the program cycle. Carefully plan and consider what you can genuinely achieve to avoid setting false expectations. IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum is a useful tool for considering levels of participation.
Whose voices and experiences should I seek?	Focus on the end-user of the service or program; this may be a client group like children and young people and/or a community. Answering this is closely linked with the considerations above e.g. if you are seeking input across a whole community you will need to map key members and consider levels of input from various perspectives. Also, remember to factor in appropriate recompense for peoples' contribution.
When do I start?	Ideally from the beginning to ensure clients are involved in identifying issues and guiding the design of a service. If this is not possible or hasn't been the case it is never too late to start. Remember- engaging people with lived experience when the service is up and running must be genuine and their opinions must be dutifully considered in service improvements.
How might we address power imbalances?	Consider and be mindful of historical, structural or contextual reasons for power imbalances, seek advice in how to address these (depending on the client group) to enable respectful and safe participation.

Tools

Get started or expand you practice with some useful tools for incorporating client experience into program design and development.

Deadly Story: Tools and Templates to Help Carers and Practitioners	Deadly Story offers a range of resources to support culturally safe engagement, including information on communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and elders.
The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) Innovation Capacity Building Tools	TASCI shares a range of useful tools including a webinar on Human Centred Design
IDEO: Human Centred Design Kit	Learning from the design industry, IDEO's design kit includes multiple creative and innovative tools on human centred design
Service Futures Co-design Process	Checkout this case study from La Trobe University for a short video on co-design and how it has been used in the field of public health