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Evaluating fuzzy concepts: Untangling balls of string with concept mapping

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The modern public policy arena is populated with many 'fuzzy', or loosely defined, conceptual terms. Good examples include 'sustainability' and 'engagement'. Due to their fuzzy nature, these concepts are often disparately understood by different stakeholder groups according to their unique and changing values. Where these understandings are not untangled, it can be difficult to evaluate the types of outcomes this terminology seeks to describe. A roundtable was held at the 2003 AES Conference outlining the case of 'science capability', a fuzzy concept that has gained currency in the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI). DPI operates in a context where knowledge and innovation are highly valued, and 'science capability' viewed as fundamental to their development. With funding resting on the successful development and evaluation of 'science capability', DPI has a need to untangle this conceptual ball of string. Recently, DPI undertook a trial of Concept Mapping to make sense of different stakeholder interpretations of 'science capability' and to develop a clearer framework for program evaluation. Concept Mapping is a structured brainstorming technique suitable for groups which uses computer software to statistically analyse results. Previously unused in this context, Concept Mapping was an innovative solution to this problem, generating useful results and process uses for participants and program operators. This roundtable presents the results from this trial and discusses the benefits and shortcomings of using Concept Mapping to unravel the tangled string of stakeholder values and fuzzy concepts.