

Tightening Research-Practice Connections: Taking ISLS Findings to Public Debate

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Abstract: This session will: sensitize participants to the importance of sharing research findings with non-researchers (e.g. teachers, school leaders, policy makers, parents); inform participants about existing strategies for engaging in public debate; and support participants in forming collaborative outreach projects. During the workshop, collaboration teams will identify specific research insights to be shared with non-researchers; start shaping key messages; and select approaches for engaging in public debate (e.g. New York Times editorial, NSTA workshop). After the workshop, teams will develop and implement the planned outreach approaches. Thereafter, a paper and/or journal special issue is envisioned, documenting the processes.

Background

A robust body of knowledge now exists to describe how policymakers and educators access, value and use research; various modes through which knowledge is generated and shared; and what aspects of evidence-based practice and research utilization in other fields can be applied to education. However, both the scholarly insights and effective practices have yet to become widely spread. Even though researchers are becoming increasingly required to disseminate research findings among practitioners, few graduate programs devote serious attention to preparing researchers for the task, and many researchers find it daunting. The proposed workshop addresses this element of “learning and becoming” in researcher practice by (a) sharing insights and examples from existing projects that stimulate fruitful research-practice connections; and (b) facilitating the design of strategies through which ISLS can contribute to public debate.

Theoretical underpinnings

Educational research has long been criticized for its weak link with practice. Explicit attempts to close the research-practice gap have been underway for over four decades. These efforts have included design team approaches and researcher-teacher models aimed at making practice the object of investigation. Shrader, Williams, Whitcomb, Finn and Gomez (1998), for example, described a research for practice approach, in the Learning Sciences, that involved working collaboratively with teachers to design, enact, and refine science materials. Lampert (1992) and Ball (Lampert & Loewenberg-Ball, 1998) taught in classrooms and made their practice an object of study. Yet, much of the work that would be useful happens in silos, is known to a few, and is rarely leveraged by policy makers, school administrators and teachers to improve educational practice. We have learned much about what aspects of evidence-based practice and research utilization in other fields can be applied to education, yet, how to share current knowledge, generate and share new knowledge, and walk the knowledge-sharing communicative path between research and practice remains a significant challenge in the Learning Sciences. Internationally, enormous efforts have been launched to improve the practical relevance and actual use of research knowledge, especially in the fields of education and health care.

Informed by the work of Rogers (1969), and review of over 2600 research studies, Havelock (1971) published a landmark report on the dissemination and use of scientific outputs. Havelock identified seven general factors that could account for how scientific outputs are taken up and used: linkage, structure, openness, capacity, reward, proximity and synergy. He identified several modes in which those factors can be seen: social interaction; research, development and diffusion (RDD); and problem solving. More recently, attention has also been given not only to the use of scientific knowledge for educational practice (e.g. Hargreaves, 1999; Levin, 2004), but also to how it is produced (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Specifically, there is growing attention for how researchers and practitioners can collaboratively bear the responsibility for both producing and using relevant knowledge in education.

Burkhardt and Schoenfeld (2003) identify seven models to describe the relationship between research and practice, five of which feature strong divisions of labor, relate more to evidence-based practice and align well with the RDD model described by Havelock, and two of which show more characteristics of Havelock’s problem solving model (both featuring design). Each of these models denotes different assumptions and expectations regarding the roles of practitioners and researchers in the generation and application of theoretical understanding.

The proposed workshop draws on evidence-based practice from RDD and design research to initiate what we hope will provide the foundation for the design of principles that inform ISLS members about approaches to sharing research findings with non-researchers (teachers, school leaders, policy makers, parents, the general public), and raise awareness about existing strategies for engaging in public debate about the use of evidence-based research for practice. In addition, we hope to contribute to the ways that Schools of Education support graduate students in building scholarship that keeps consideration of how to share findings with practitioners as a central component of the research and dissemination process.

Workshop Structure

Before the Workshop

A Call for Participation will be issued in early February through the ISLS mailing list. Participants will submit their experiences and insights concerning the workshop theme in the form of short papers (1000-2000 words). This may be based on theoretical, methodological or practical work that has been presented elsewhere, or in the current conference, and will provide seed ideas to be synthesized into specific outreach messages. Through a structured review process by the workshop organizers, all papers clearly relevant to the workshop theme will be invited for inclusion. All participants will be given access to all papers, and encouraged to read especially those that have been clustered into the same –emergent– theme as their own. Authors will be asked to send a brief presentation (1 powerpoint slide) to the organizers the week before the workshop. Though working groups during the workshop may change slightly, the screening and clustering process will help us make the most efficient use of our precious time together.

During the Workshop

As previously indicated this workshop aims to: (a) sensitize participants to the importance of sharing research findings with various stakeholder groups (teachers, school leaders, policy makers, parents, the general public); (b) inform participants about existing strategies for engaging in public debate; and (c) support participants in forming collaboration teams that will get started identifying and shaping a core message (during the workshop) as well as developing and implementing an outreach vehicle (e.g. New York Times editorial, NSTA workshop) to inform public debate (after the workshop).

To meet these aims, the workshop is divided into four main stages. The *first* stage is intended to sensitize and inform participants by sharing insights and strategies from existing examples of both successful outreach strategies, and incidents where an ISLS voice (or similar) seemed severely lacking. With the goal of informing and inspiring, the examples will exhibit variation in message content, target groups and dissemination media. Strategies for sharing (emerging) insights will be discussed in terms of: content (focus), form (products and activities), medium (face-to-face, online, etc.) and time (sustained, bursts, frequency, etc.). At least one project will represent each of the aforementioned orientations (RDD; design research). During the *second* stage of the workshop, participants will be encouraged to articulate the kinds of messages they might like to disseminate, and to discuss these with like-minded individuals. This will be facilitated by single powerpoint slides that participants will have created ahead of time. Working groups will discuss message content and potential target groups.

During the *third* stage of the workshop, working groups will consider and outline a specific outreach vehicle they intend to develop and implement. They will document their work using shared GoogleDocs, live, during the session. During the *final* stage of the workshop, participants will report back to the group, discuss potential overlaps and give constructive feedback to each other.

The workshop will last for 3.5 hours with a 30 min break at the standard break time. The workshop agenda is provided below.

- 2.00-2.45: Welcome, brief introductions, goals, background, examples
- 2.45-3.30: Brief presentations, group forming
- 3.00-3.30: Break, form working groups for designing after break
- 3.30-4.00: Identify focus, establish mission, set goals
- 4.00-5.00: Refine focus, outline outreach strategy, document work
- 5.00-5.30: Report back, conclusions, action items

After the Workshop

Following the workshop, teams will be supported in the process of realizing their outreach strategies, sharing them with one another, and more broadly. Specifically, a paper or journal special issue is envisioned which documents messages worth sharing outside the ISLS community, and journeys taken to do so.

References

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