The 2014 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme was “The Power of Education Research for Innovation in Practice and Policy”. What do you see as the most promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?

You and I may well have completely different understandings of educational change innovation. Frequently, so do practitioners and policy makers in different settings. What in one context may appear like a totally new and transformational way to address an educational challenge may be a well-known approach in other contexts. For some people, innovation just means tweaking an existing practice. Equally, innovation could be a major transformation of learning for everyone through evolving technology and social media. This poses interesting issues and possibilities for research and researchers.

In England, I’m currently intrigued by the Educational Endowment Foundation’s (EEF) efforts, “an independent grant-making charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement, ensuring that children from all background can fulfil their potential and make the most of their talents”. The charity aims to develop and evaluate cost effective and replicable projects that address educational disadvantage. It does this “by supporting innovation and scaling up projects with a measurable impact on attainment”.

EEF encourages researchers and other stakeholders and practitioners to collaborate in designing projects and draft designs are then worked up in collaboration with independent evaluators who use randomisation and qualitative methodologies. The current funding round is focusing on neuroscience projects. EEF also has a toolkit, co-designed with the Sutton Trust that practitioners can use to find out about interventions that are: a) likely to work, b) cost effective, and c) based on solid and significant evidence. Practitioners are then encouraged, with supporting guidance, to carry out their own evaluations once they...
have chosen the interventions. The bank of toolkit interventions will grow as results of the projects described earlier become available. Finally, EEF recently put out a call for knowledge mobilisation proposals – aiming to promote more effective use of research findings. Funded projects will be focused in one of three areas – the research engaged school, approaches to mobilising research, and the role of networks and intermediaries. Successful projects will also be matched with independent evaluators.

The initiative incentivises collaboration between researchers and practitioners, both in designing projects and interventions and in evaluating them. This kind of user engagement with research appears to be building both greater knowledge about and commitment towards research and its use to enhance practice and student learning.

Internationally, the efforts of the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) in Education’s Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) are also interesting. This initiative is more transformational in its aims. The project’s ambitious goals are "to serve the educational reform agenda by:

- Analyzing and synthesizing current international research findings on learning, teaching and learning environments.
- Identifying and analyzing examples of innovative learning environments [ILEs] from all over the world.
- Engaging with the community of policy reformers, innovators and learning scientists to discuss how to make better use of these findings to make OECD education systems learning driven". 3

Of 125 ILE cases from participating countries, 40 were subjected to case study research analysis. In the final phase of the project, the emphasis is on spread and sustainability of innovative change across education systems, with differing levels of participation from those who are merely providing information on strategies and initiatives, through to five volunteer systems who are participating as Laboratories of Learning Change, engaging in action, development and reflection to grow and sustain innovative learning environments through a chosen strategy.

In addition to the work ILE is undertaking with participating systems, relevant topics related to implementation and change are being analyzed. One topic is learning leadership. Another topic is evaluation. Here, the role of research becomes very different as the participants, OECD/CERI colleagues and supporting research advisors consider how best to ‘marry’ innovation and evaluation through evaluative thinking. A background paper is being written and will be discussed at a seminar for participants. Meanwhile, participants are already trialling their own innovative research designs. For example, the Austrian team is using vignette research to gain access to learning experiences in the middle of the ‘pedagogic situation’, capturing lived experience as it occurs. Such methodology is intended to initiate an experience in the reader that gets as close as it can to that of the researcher’s experience of the experience of students experiencing school. Evaluators would then facilitate innovators in engaging with the vignette to help explore meaning, insights and the innovation’s impact.

So, some might assume from the conference theme that all or most of the power of educational research resides in researchers providing practitioners and policymakers with the content focus for their innovations. The researchers carry out the research, find answers to pressing issues of practice and policy and then the research just needs to be implemented. But, as these examples, especially the OECD one, highlight, ensuring research power offers a much wider
array of possibilities.

Even when it comes to engaging practitioners and policy makers with research findings, as those studying knowledge utilization, knowledge transfer and the more recent field of knowledge mobilization know, the power only comes when we find effective ways of engaging practitioners and policymakers with the research findings. This is a matter of learning that I call knowledge animation. It involves creation of new contextualized knowledge through a social co-construction process. In a current project, funded by England’s Economic and Social Research Council, colleagues and I are working together with a large network of schools – Challenge Partners – to explore how middle leaders share research and practice-based knowledge effectively across schools about excellent middle leadership practice and professional development; develop evidence-based tools and processes to track ways in which they change and enhance their practice as a result of knowledge sharing; have mechanisms to track the impact of their knowledge sharing and changed professional practice on changed teacher practice; and are able to share the outcomes of their applied project work more widely to benefit a broader range of educators. We are learning a lot about genuine knowledge exchange between researchers and practitioners that we hope to share later this year after the end of the project.

I would hope that all researchers are open to thinking creatively and challenge themselves about how they can best support and, indeed, challenge practitioners and policymakers to engage with and make the best use of research.

You co-directed the first study on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in England almost a decade ago. Over the years, what have you seen as most valuable and helpful to collaboration and professional development that enhances practice and student learning?

Enhancing student learning in the broadest sense is what we’re aiming for; that’s the ultimate purpose of PLCs. Evidence from many sources is clear that teachers can make a huge difference to their students’ learning experiences and outcomes. So understanding the kinds of collaborative and professional development work that enhances practice is critical. In the same way that cooperative learning has been proven effective for students, many of the most effective professional learning experiences are collaborative.

Reviews of the impact of professional learning communities generally concur that they make a positive difference for students when teachers analyse the impact of their teaching practice on students’ learning and achievement and are supported in processing new understandings and their implications for teaching. This kind of analysis and support can be found in collaborative inquiry.

A number of forms of collaborative inquiry exist. The one that has most intrigued me over a number of years was designed and is facilitated by Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser at Vancouver Island University in British Columbia, Canada (two former teachers, principals, and Ministry officials). They have drawn on the research of many others but, most notably, Helen Timperley of Auckland University. Significantly, Helen Timperley led the team that carried out a best evidence synthesis of research on professional development and learning that leads to changes in teachers’ practice and improved student learning outcomes. Their conclusion that successful professional learning involves cycles of inquiry and knowledge building helped Halbert and Kaser sharpen an already research-rich framework for collaborative inquiry.
Already, the framework and several evaluations have demonstrated impact at a range of levels, including for student learning outcomes.

I have also observed and acted as critical friend to collaborative learning projects involving teachers and leaders in different schools carrying out reviews in each other’s schools. The examples that have most impact on changing teacher practice pay attention to promoting deep learning conversations between team members as they visit classrooms and interview students and teachers using protocols they have designed to focus their inquiry efforts. Like the BC spirals of inquiry framework, they tend to start by focusing on what’s going on for their learners. This kind of data capture – and it often takes a range of forms – also provides them with a baseline against which they can explore later progress.

Thinking about data, around the world we are also seeing an increasing number of researcher-led and/or research-informed initiatives to help school leaders and teachers use data as a key stimulus for improvement, paralleled by a burgeoning number of practitioner guides, but also research papers, including a recently published international handbook. Using data is attractive to politicians and policy makers with their eye on international league tables, but it is often hard to find how to do this in a way that isn’t mechanised or formulaic. A project funded by the Norwegian Research Council which is creatively drawing on the English research on whole-school professional learning communities to help participating school and municipality leaders use and design processes that will help their teachers engage with and use a broad range of data for formative purposes to develop their practice and enhance the progress of their students.

My interest is in creating capacity for learning. I view this as different from instituting and sustaining reform, although pertinent to it. As the question highlights, the world is rapidly changing, but we have to be able to keep moving towards the goal of ensuring the best possible learning experiences and outcomes for students in order to prepare them for their future. In a fast moving world, navigating our way through unforeseen twists and turns, dealing with challenges, spotting and making the most of opportunities are all essential. These depend on being clear-headed but flexible and adaptive, curious, imaginative, willing to taking risks, resilient and with a strong sense of wellbeing, and connected with others. Such qualities help give people the power to engage in and sustain continuous learning individually and collectively. It’s what we all need to be doing and what I believe will offer the best possibilities for addressing the issues and embracing the opportunities that the changing and globalized world offers.

The word ‘build’ has a structural and ‘fixed’ connotation; once it is built, it will last. Yes, it’ll last, but it won’t be flexible to change and as it gets older, it may crumble, or cracks may appear as it’s no longer fit for purpose. Creating capacity for learning, by contrast, implies fluid and continuous movement, the power to alter as necessary. For the concept to provide widespread and sustained change over time, we’d be looking for shifts in the world view and mindsets of many politicians, policy makers and practitioners, moving from a ‘fix it’ to a ‘cultivate it’ mentality.

You have been an active member of the Educational Change Special Interest Group since its inception. What are some key lessons you can share with us in contributing to the future of educational change practice and research?
What attracted me to the field of educational change and has always excited me about it is how it embraces everything from intensely personal responses to richly systemic activity and interactions, diverse perspectives, complexity, unpredictability, as well as purposeful focus. Having an open mind, being willing to engage with colleagues working in different disciplines, and being willing to be challenged about our own mental models and practices as researchers is going to become increasingly critical. With the OECD’s call for teachers to be knowledge workers, and initiatives in my own and some other countries for schools to lead change, the ways the many researchers have engaged with schools are changing.

Most of my suggestions are embedded in answers to the other questions. I also hope that in the future, educational change researchers will continue to push the boundaries with new methodologies that capture the complexity, the innovative nature and the fast movement of the change that we are studying. If we are researchers are studying educational change, I think it’s important that at least some of us engage in new forms of research and think seriously about how we can improve research through practitioner and other stakeholder engagement. In my own work over the last few years I have been exploring the concept of knowledge animation, the social process by which practitioners and policy makers make learning connections when engaging with research findings. Knowledge animation helps people to learn and use ideas generated elsewhere, by stimulating conversations that challenge their thinking, promote new shared understanding and help them create knowledge that will enhance their practice and policy. Most important, we need to use from SIG members’ and others’ research what we understand and are continuing to learn about successful professional learning communities and learning networks to keep connecting in productive ways, continue our conversations, expand our horizons and push the boundaries.

NOTES
1. educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk
2. educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/
6. I have been involved in a number of Educational Change SIG symposia on this topic over the last few years.
7. Middle leaders in England have formal roles in schools such as head of a subject department or a year group in a secondary (high) school or literacy or mathematics coordinator in a primary (elementary) school.
Louise Stoll is Professor of Education at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education, University of London, a freelance researcher and international consultant. Louise’s research and development activity focuses on how schools, districts and national systems create capacity for learning and improvement, focusing especially on leadership, learning communities and learning networks. Louise acts as an external expert for the OECD, carrying out evaluations of the Austrian Leadership Academy and School Evaluation in Flanders and co-developing Improving School Leadership: The Toolkit for the OECD to help policy makers and school leaders use the findings of its Improving School Leadership activity and is supporting the OECD’s learning leadership activity with its Innovative Learning Environments initiative. She is author and editor of many publications including Professional Learning Communities, It’s About Learning; Changing Our Schools; and articles on creating capacity for learning, networking between schools and creative leadership, her books have been translated into five languages. She can be reached at louise.stoll@ioe.ac.uk.