The 2017 AERA theme is Knowledge to Action: Achieving the Promise of Equal Educational Opportunity. How does your scholarship align with the 2017 AERA meeting theme?

My work has dealt with how to improve learning through formative assessments that cater to students' diverse educational needs. Uruguay has a long tradition of assessment geared towards improving teaching rather than focusing on accountability. Given the distinction between assessment of learning and assessment for learning, we have always preferred the latter as it allows for action-based intervention rather than a mere description of what the student knows. The rationale goes in line with the old saying: "No matter how much you weigh the cow, it would not gain weight," so instead of continually measuring what children know or do not know, we focus our attention on identifying what needs to be taught next and on improving learning.

Standardized assessment for mathematics and language in Uruguay started in 1996 with a representative sample of students at the end of grade six. These tests have been given every three or four years ever since. For us, the problems detected in the results that were obtained in the national assessment were not restricted to grade six. Rather, they reflected how kids progress in their learning throughout primary school.

That is why we developed a system-wide online formative assessment from third to ninth grade for teachers to use. This has become an important tool of professional development because it leads teachers to analyze the results with other staff members and to plan ways of improving learning, given the results of the assessment. The purpose of this online environment is to help teachers identify what a student needs to learn next in order to move ahead. A guiding framework for this practice is Breakthrough (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006) and Stratosphere (Fullan, 2013).

Lately, as part of my work at Plan Ceibal—an Uruguayan initiative to introduce Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in public education—I have been working with NPDL (New Pedagogies for Deep Learning Network) on ways to implement Michael Fullan’s
approach of integrating pedagogy, system change, and technology within the Uruguayan Sistema de Evaluación de los Aprendizajes (System of Educational Assessment - SEA). SEA is an online assessment system that provides formative assessment tools in mathematics, science, and reading from grade three to grade six, but we are also aiming to expand to include grade seven, eight, and nine. SEA was heavily influenced by Fullan’s ideas of intelligent accountability, and the importance of collaboration and social capital to foster change.

My work has also focused on helping to identify educational challenges and problems in Uruguay. Jose Pedro Varela (1845-1879) our great reformer was inspired by the American Educational System in the late nineteen century, and we were very successful to promote Uruguay’s education for all in Primary school. The change was made possible for several reasons that included a great expansion of public investment, a particular language of inclusiveness, and appropriate practices that enable all stakeholders to take an active role in the educational project. Until now, we were not able to set up the same kind of systemic support that promotes opportunities for all at the secondary level. We are now starting to change the culture, language, and heritage of secondary education so that it can educate a generation without selecting those who are deemed, by default, more suitable for tertiary education. Educational Research has pointed out some of these limitations, but we are still trapped by ideas and practices of the old selective model of secondary education. Part of my work has dealt with this kind of issues and ways to move forward educational ideals forward.

You’ve played a prominent role in developing a unique formative online assessment tool in Uruguay that is breaking new ground in the field of large-scale assessment. Can you describe this system, its use, its potential, and the key ways in which it is different from existing system-wide assessment tools?

When Uruguay launched the country-wide OLPC program (One Laptop Per Child) or as we call it Plan Ceibal, we knew that the days of paper-and-pencil tests were over. In fact, the spark that started SEA—the Uruguayan Sistema de Evaluación de los Aprendizajes—was the lack of resources to print enough tests to allow more students to participate. As soon as we started, we realized that we were in a completely different ball game, which was much more than just a change of paper-based assessment to digital-based assessment. We were able to a) distribute the tests to almost all students; b) provide real-time results to different audiences such as teachers, school principals, directors, supervisors, and policy makers; and c) promote collaboration between staff members to improve results. For a system that depended heavily on teachers’ subjective evaluations of student achievement, things began to change.

In a nutshell, SEA is an online platform that provides subject-specific formative assessment tools that teachers use in the middle and end of the school year. The purpose of these tools is to direct discussions that promote learning. After each assessment cycle, a school meeting is held to discuss results and make changes to redirect teaching and modify pedagogical strategies. At another level, the school principal can retrieve a summary of the results for the whole school, and supervisors can access the system to get a snapshot of the learning process taking place in their district. A distinct feature of the Uruguayan SEA is that it does not draw on the need of public accountability, but rather on the importance of teachers’ professional development as key to improving teaching and learning. There is no other example of a national assessment program in Latin America that has gone so boldly in this direction as the Uruguayans have.

What conditions, particular to Uruguay, made the development of this online assessment system possible, and what should education systems in other countries keep in mind if interested in adopting or developing a system of this kind?
First, the landscape of schooling changed dramatically since Uruguay decided to participate in Plan Ceibal (the OLPC program) assuring connectivity to the Internet to every public educational institution. The push towards the incorporation of ICT into the educational system was a key factor that challenged the way we did assessment in the past.

Second, Plan Ceibal was possible because it was initially carried out by the National Laboratory of Technology that ensures an ongoing update of school-based technological tools. On top of that, a coalition that included the National Administration of Public Education (ANEP), the Ministry of Education, Universidad de la Republica—the largest public University, and the State Telephone Company were in charge to assure that the objectives were accomplished in every corner of the country.

Third, Uruguay is a small country of 3,450,000 inhabitants and a highly professional workforce. Just prior to Plan Ceibal, we collected a Teachers Census in 2007 that showed that about 40% of the teachers had very few computer skills. After Plan Ceibal, teachers’ computer skills improved dramatically and the excuse of not knowing how to work with a computer became impossible to hold especially in light of the fact that kids were instrumental to helping teachers use technology.

There is a new digital economy that permits this kind of development where the omnipresence of different educational platforms construct a real stratosphere that allows teachers and students to connect and interact in new ways. This is possible as the cost of the technological infrastructure is reducing rapidly thus increasing the possibility of having 24/7 access to resources that can be renewed rapidly, and consequently matching the cost of renewing printed materials.

You have pointed out elsewhere that while Uruguay is the most egalitarian country in Latin America in terms of income distribution, income equality has not translated into equality in the distribution of educational opportunity across the country. How do you explain this paradox?

We were pioneers of Public-Education-for-all in the Latin American region, but only up to primary school. When the expectation of earning an education increased to at least high school, we lagged behind most of the countries of the region. In the early seventies we were one of the countries with the highest number of high school students, now we are the forth country with the lowest level of high school graduation in the region. Though we have the lowest Gini index in Latin America (Gini index is used to represent the income distribution of a nation’s residents) and the lowest proportion of population under the poverty line, we still have a large gradient of any educational outcome when it is analyzed against indicators of wealth. In PISA and in TERCE (Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study that Uruguay participated in), we have a larger gradient than Chile, which has far more issues of social inequalities.

The explanation of this paradox has three main elements. First, the features of the very equalitarian welfare state in Uruguay do not apply to providing education because education is an independent and autonomous entity from the rest of the public services. This context carries very specific implications that include the fact that the egalitarian character of the Uruguayan welfare state did not reach the educational services. It should be pointed out that the Uruguayan Public Education system is administered by an independent, autonomous body, not connected with the Executive Branch of the government. Hence, it has fewer possibilities of transformation.

Second, we have a very stratified system between public and private education. Though more than 80% of the population is enrolled in public schools, the private sector recruits families in the highest ranks of income. In addition, urban areas have become highly segregated by
by socioeconomic status, and since schools are populated only by the children who live in the assigned school zone they too have become segregated.

Third, even if education is mandatory up to the end of high school, it is still socially acceptable that a youngster leaves the educational system at age fifteen if he is not academically successful in high school. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds drop out early, as they do not find the curriculum that is geared to prepare them to the university relevant to their future prospects.

Though we have recognized this problem for a long time now, we have not been successful with introducing adequate policies to promote more egalitarian opportunities in education.

In your view, what are the most important achievements of public education in Uruguay and where would you like to see public education in your country moving forward?

As pointed out, we were very successful in providing primary education for all, but now the challenge is to have the same accomplishment at least up to the end of high school. The current government has set a high bar to achieve: everybody should finish lower secondary education (up to grade nine) and 75% of a cohort should finish high school. These are very high expectations since only a little more than 40% of each cohort finish high school today—in many cases with a large delay with the theoretical age given the large retention rate in primary and secondary school.

We need to move away from the old “selective model” where all the students that could not keep up with a highly academic program of 12 subjects would be retained and eventually drop out. Education for young people should be about teaching ways to understand the world and about allowing them to participate actively in the pursuit of their vocation. Uruguay takes part in the NPDL network with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Netherland, United States and Finland. We are experimenting with ways to transform schooling from being structured around the transmission of content knowledge that is to be tested on to being aligned with project-based schooling that allows for deeper and more meaningful learning. The twenty-first-century skills include capabilities of addressing new problems and of learning how to collaborate, communicate, and express one’s own ideas in complex societal settings. We need to embrace this new agenda in in our schools so that they can work with diverse populations where everyone gets equal opportunities for learning.

What I would like to see in my country is not only arguments and heated debates about the educational crisis, but also some consensual agreement and a clear vision on the direction that we have to move forward, along with a common strategy on how to get there. The urgency of change is already instilled, but we need to free ourselves from the traps of the old system so that we can embrace a new paradigm of schooling that allows for a student-centered education with new alliances between teachers and students.

References

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