The 2019 AERA theme is Leveraging Education Research in a Post-Truth Era: Multimodal Narratives to Democratize Evidence. How can such leveraging of educational research contribute to the democratization of evidence and to educational change?

I don’t think educational research very often contributes to the democratization of evidence and educational change. Rather than share our research with a wider audience, we lock up most of our work behind paywalls. Given this reality and other hindrances regarding accessibility, we might collectively ask: How much of our research actually makes it to policymakers in ways that are impactful? How much of our scholarship actually makes it to practicing educators in ways that are meaningful? A tiny fraction? Whatever the small percentage, it’s not nearly enough. If it were, we’d likely see much more of our research translate into actionable work.

Our work will continue to be marginalized or ignored by those who make decisions at the organizational and policy levels until faculty embrace the principles of open access and open-border communities in relation to promotion and tenure, where we send our research, and where we have our conversations and share our thinking. Our entire information landscape is being transformed by principles of openness, transparency, sharing, and connectedness. Those terms rarely apply to the scholarly work that most of us do in educational academe. But for some reason we’re happy to complain that no one listens to us...

If we truly want to ‘democratize evidence,’ maybe we should put that evidence in places where people actually can get to it. If we truly want our research to contribute to educational change, maybe we should put our scholarship in forms that people actually can use. Generally speaking, our primary audience for our scholarly work tends to be...
other academics. I’m not saying anything new here - we’ve known all of this for a long time - but I haven’t seen a groundswell of educational researchers clamoring to change either their individual practices or the larger systems in which we operate.

I would be absolutely delighted to see education scholars worldwide treat seriously the opportunities that sit right in front of our noses. If we wish to get closer to operationalizing the ideals outlined in the call for this year’s AERA conference, that only will occur when most of us embrace openness and sharing, when we dialogue with non-faculty around the world, when we participate in and contribute to online educational communities, and, most importantly, when we become trusted voices (not interlopers) within those communities. Whether we like it or not, publishing yet another journal article without working on our mindsets and these structural issues isn’t going to accomplish these goals for us.

"If we want to facilitate change, we have to find relevant communities and become trusted voices within those groups."

Given your focus on P-12 school technology leadership issues, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

Spinning off of my response to the previous question, the most impactful thing that I’ve ever done in my career is to start blogging. I launched Dangerously Irrelevant in 2006 and found immediately that it was a wonderful place for me to share my ideas and thinking in a more authentic, personal voice than most research journals allow. Within months, others began to find me and link to my work. Their engagement with my thinking drove my engagement with their thinking in return. And off I went. I now have one of the top education blogs in the world in terms of subscribers, traffic, and reach. I have over 53,000 followers on Twitter. I have a video series viewed by at least 100 million people. I regularly am asked to come work with educators and policymakers around the world. I see my ideas and thinking bouncing all over the Internet and within schools everywhere. And so on...

It’s incredibly difficult for me to articulate the learning power of having an active network of hundreds of thousands of people. I hear from, and interact daily with, really smart people all around the world. And very, very few of them are educational researchers. I have learned incredible amounts from my online personal/professional learning network (PLN) and have access to countless resources that I never would have found otherwise. As education scholars, we love it when someone contacts us and tells us that they found a particular study or protocol to be helpful. That happens to me nearly daily because the number of interactions that I have with others is sizably larger than most other faculty. It’s not about ego gratification, it’s about reach and visibility and trying to make an impact. As I said in my previous response, if we want to
facilitate change, we have to find relevant communities and become trusted voices within those groups.

Blogging is powerful because it allows for reflection, connection with others, the formulation of ideas in long-form, and the creation of a legacy body of work that short-form platforms don’t enable. Sure, it’s great to fire off a snappy Tweet or share a quick photo on Instagram. But nothing beats long-form blogging for reflection, reach, and visibility. If no one ever read my blog again, I would keep writing there because the ongoing process of capturing my thinking in real-time has been so powerful for me. And I’m continually amazed that so many people want to come join me in conversation and make my thinking better.

“Meaningful Blogging is powerful because it allows for reflection and connection with others.”

Your work on principals and superintendents and the degree to which they are “technology-savvy” and able to lead technology integration efforts, suggests a need to rethink not only how such efforts are rolled out but also how we train leaders to engage in this work and support teachers’ learning and growth. How might these findings contribute to change in policy/practice?

In a 2011 article for the Journal of Research on Leadership Education, we (McLeod, Bathon & Richardson) tried to make a distinction between:

1. using digital technologies to teach traditional educational leadership content, in which the emphasis is placed, not on changing the substantive content of educational leadership coursework, but rather on changing the delivery modality of those classes and how they might be altered and improved using digital learning and communication tools;

2. training school administrators to better use digital technologies, in which the technology emphasis is on course content rather than course delivery, but the content focus is on digital productivity and communication tools (e.g., how to use Microsoft Excel); and

3. preparing school administrators to be better technology leaders, in which, like the second domain, the technology emphasis is on course content rather than course delivery, but the content focus is on leadership capacities rather than tools.

Research in this third domain of educational leadership scholarship is particularly scarce, whether in preservice or inservice contexts. Unfortunately, it is this third domain that targets one of the most critical educational issues of our time: the need to create and facilitate learning environments for P-12 students that prepare them for the digital, global world in which we now live.

Unfortunately, most educational leadership faculty don’t know how to do this work. They’re not very technology-fluent themselves and they don’t spend much time in schools that are using technology to drive powerful student learning. It’s hard to
implement what you can’t envision or do yourself.

In a 2011 UCEA Review article, I said:

“Can we as educational leadership faculty do better? Given the scale and scope of the transformations occurring around us - and their power and potential for student learning - we MUST do better. It’s embarrassing to consider how little we’ve done to stay relevant. A learning revolution has occurred and - given the attention we’ve paid it - it’s as if many of us didn’t care.”

Eight years later, most educational leadership faculty or programs have yet to embrace this critically-important need of preservice and inservice administrators (and, thus, the children that they serve).

Accordingly, we continue to turn out new principals and superintendents who have very little exposure to successful digital and future-ready leadership practices and principles.

Educational Change expects those engaged in and with schools, schooling, and school systems to spearhead deep and often difficult transformation. How might those in the field of Educational Change best support these individuals and groups through these processes?

The best thing we can do as educational scholars and postsecondary instructors is to visit schools that already are engaged in deep, substantive transformations. There are some amazing schools in every state. They focus on deeper learning, greater student agency, more authentic work, and rich technology infusion. They create amazing new learning opportunities for students who, in turn, do incredible, mind-blowing work that goes far beyond the factual recall and procedural regurgitation that dominates most classroom settings.

We need more studies of these schools and their leaders. Many of them do not follow linear models of change. They use terminology and techniques from entrepreneurs and startup accelerators, and a bunch of them will tell you that they’re trying to live in ‘perpetual beta,’ complete with rapid iteration cycles, A-B testing, and instantaneous feedback loops. This is not the typical way that most school leaders think about change and yet it’s the reason why many of these ‘deeper learning schools,’ as the Hewlett Foundation calls them, are able to adapt and innovate so rapidly to create new, student-centric learning experiences for children.

We also need more research about how these schools and their leaders create cultures of innovation. If you visit these communities, everyone at all levels of the
system tends to discuss how it is focused on innovation rather than being captive to glacially-slow rates of change. These leaders create virtuous cycles of innovation that feed on themselves and instill pride in both their internal and external stakeholder groups. It’s awesome to visit a school community in which educators, students, and parents proudly proclaim, “Here, in this school, we are innovative. We try things and take risks and it’s very exciting.”

Ultimately, of course, we need experts in educational change to not only analyze these new models of schooling but also figure out how to translate them and transport them into more traditional school contexts. How do we take the exciting work happening in these innovative schools and ‘infect’ others to do the same? That’s the ultimate question for us in this field because - in a technology-suffused, global world rife with rapid changes and new challenges - innovation work is equity work these days.

Where do you perceive the field of Educational Change is going? What excites you about Educational Change now and in the future?

We now have a critical mass of over 500 schools in America alone - and several thousand worldwide - that are focused on deeper learning, greater student agency, and more authentic work. And they’re often using learning technologies as robust levers to facilitate their students’ work. It is very difficult to visit these schools and not wish that the children in your lives were there - your children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. Students in these schools are engaged, they're enthusiastic about what they're learning and what they're doing, and they're often making a concrete, tangible difference in the world around them. We see children in these schools rise up to the interesting challenges that are put before them and the critical thinking and problem-solving that occurs in these schools, dwarfs what you would see in more traditional school contexts.

This work is incredibly exciting. We have known for a long time what it takes to engage children in more rich and fulfilling educational experiences. But until recently we’ve never been able to create a critical mass of exemplars that we can visit and learn from. In the past, we mostly reserved this kind of student-empowered learning for our younger children in Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and a few democratic schools. Today there’s likely a school or two within easy driving distance of anyone who wants to visit one.

Deeper learning school networks such as Big Picture Learning, the New Tech Network, EL, and High Tech High are supporting each other and new arrivals to the scene. They’re also creating large-scale networks that rival the size of some of the educational reform networks such as KIPP,
Green Dot, BASIS, and Success Academy. But the work in these schools is so much more exciting. Instead of drill-and-kill teaching practices and draconian disciplinary practices, these students are building robots, learning to code, writing in authentic online spaces, designing their own web sites, crafting 3-D virtual models, engaging in service projects that benefit the community, and much more.

“When we give students more meaningful work, and when we appropriately scaffold the structures around them, we can give kids wings”

It’s hard to be inspired by worksheets. Answering a few more practice problems from the back of the chapter does little to engage children. But when we give students more meaningful work, and when we appropriately scaffold the structures around them, we can give kids wings. That’s what’s exciting in the world of educational change right now, and that’s what we all should be striving for.

Resources

To learn more about some of these schools, check out any of these deeper learning school networks:

- Big Picture Learning, www.bigpicturelearning.org
- ConnectEd California, www.connectedcalifornia.org
- EdVisions Schools, www.edvisions.com
- EL Education, https://eleducation.org
- Envision Education, www.envisionschools.org
- High Tech High, www.hightechhigh.org
- Independent Curriculum Group, http://independentcurriculum.org
- Internationals Network for Public Schools, http://internationalsnps.org
- New Visions for Public Schools, www.newvisions.org

References


SCOTT MCLEOD

An Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Colorado Denver, Scott McLeod, J.D., Ph.D., is widely recognized as one of the nation’s leading experts on P-12 school technology leadership issues. He is the Founding Director of the UCEA Center for the Advanced Study of Technology Leadership in Education (CASTLE), the only university center in the U.S. dedicated to the technology needs of school administrators, and is the co-creator of the wildly popular video series, Did You Know? (Shift Happens). He also is the co-creator of the 4 Shifts Protocol for lesson/unit redesign and the founder of both the annual Iowa 1:1 Institute and EdCampIowa, one of the largest EdCamp events in the United States. Dr. McLeod has worked with hundreds of schools, districts, universities, and other organizations and has received numerous awards for his technology leadership work, including the 2016 Award for Outstanding Leadership from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). In 2015, he was one of three finalists to be the next Director of the Iowa Department of Education. In 2011, he was a Visiting Faculty Fellow at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Dr. McLeod was one of the pivotal figures in Iowa’s grass roots 1:1 computing movement, which has resulted in over 220 school districts providing their students with powerful learning devices. Dr. McLeod blogs regularly about technology leadership issues at Dangerously Irrelevant and is a frequent keynote speaker and workshop facilitator at regional, state, national, and international conferences. He has written or edited 3 books and 170 articles and other publications, and is one of the most visible education professors in the United States.