Back in late April, I was asked if I would participate in an interview for the AERA Educational Change SIG’s Lead the Change series. About a week later I was sent the questions below. For the past two and a half months I’ve been thinking about those questions... And I’ve come to the conclusion that, as a field, educational change remains something we are all somewhat aware of; but I’ve come to learn that for most in the broader field of education it is just a passing awareness – myself included. I believe this may be why my responses to all but the questions specific to K-12 distance, online, and/or blended learning, and quite brief and have a common theme.

The 2020 AERA theme is The Power and Possibilities for the Public Good: When Researchers and Organizational Stakeholders Collaborate and is a call to “to address educational challenges through policy and community engagement and to work with diverse institutional and organizational stakeholders.” How can such leveraging of educational research contribute to collaboration and engagement within and across diverse stakeholder groups and to educational change?

I have to be honest and say the premise of this question actually frustrates me a great deal. And the reason it frustrates me is because of the significant divide that exists between educational researchers and classroom teachers. I often hear teachers acknowledging that there’s no silver bullet when it comes to education, but in their very next breath they will often promote whatever “magic” solution some vendor is selling them or an ideologically-focused unproven, intervention that some organization is pushing. This is true even when educational researchers try to distill their ideas to make them more accessible and briefer, many teachers still claim to not have the time to read “that research.” While it is clear that many teachers are overburdened, I would argue that many simply don’t have the
patience to explore the nuances of what is not a black and white context.

To provide a specific example from the jurisdiction where the 2019 AERA annual conference was held, about a month before that conference the government of Ontario made a series of education announcements — one of which was a graduation requirement that would see all high school students in the province complete four online or e-learning courses. Now, you don’t necessarily have to be an expert in K-12 online learning to know that the online environment is similar to the classroom environment in that, if you have a model of design, delivery, and support designed in one fashion, you’ll be able to support one group of students and other students will struggle. Any educational researcher focused on quality teaching and learning will tell you that we need to adjust how learning opportunities are designed, delivered, and supported in order for a full range of students to have success. As you might expect, the current model of e-learning in Ontario was designed with a specific purpose in mind — that being, for the most part, to provide opportunities to students unable to access specific courses in their traditional face-to-face environment for a variety of reasons. Given that purpose, as well as the specific courses often offered, a particular model of learning has evolved in the province that works for many students, but not all.

Most people can probably guess where I am going, the discussion we’ve seen around this topic since it was first announced in mid-March has been didactic at best. On one side are those touting e-learning as a way to provide educational opportunity for all students, essentially making it a saviour of sorts for modernizing and democratizing public education. Alternatively, the other side has stated that e-learning, in its current form, hasn’t been successful in reaching or providing opportunity to this, or that group of students. In the process, this group has demonized the current system of e-learning, those who work in it, as well as anyone who doesn’t share their pessimistic view of the proposal. Unfortunately, these perspectives are those pushed in both traditional and on social media. As a result, any nuanced discussion of the potential for e-learning and what would actually need to be invested in order to make the proposal a success has been lost.

It is kind of unfortunate that as I think about my response to this question that such a negative example comes to mind, and maybe it is the first thing I think of because it is an issue that I’m currently focused on at the moment, as well as its geographic and temporal ties to the previous AERA annual conference. However, I do think that it highlights the tension between researchers and practitioners when it comes to having a
meaningful impact in the field. I believe it also highlights a fundamental change in the attitudes of those outside of the academy who are more and more resistant to focus upon anything perceived as intellectual – an orientation those within the field of education have always mistakenly believed ourselves to be immune. So, while I don’t advocate that educational researchers disengage from the process of trying to engage with practitioners, I think we need to approach the situation with a more realistic understanding that the field of education, and those who practice it, may be much more reflective of society as a whole then what we would like to believe.

Given your focus on the factors influencing the effective design, delivery and support of K-12 online learning, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

This question was actually the main reason why I agreed to participate in this activity, because I think it highlights a fundamental problem we have in the larger field of education or instructional technology. One would think that in a discipline focused upon the changing technologies and how they impact the educational experience there would be a significant focus upon the field of educational change. But as I’ve reflected upon these questions for many, many weeks – I struggled to frame my thoughts through the lens of educational change.

One conclusion I had as part of this exercise was that even though the very genesis of what I focus upon involves, and - to a large part - is driven by, educational change, I know very little about the field. I could probably provide a little bit better than a pedestrian explanation of Everett Rogers’ (2010) ideas around the diffusion of innovation. However, that understanding is based on passing references to that particular set of ideas and, maybe, one or two hours of focus on it in a single class during my doctoral program. Beyond those limited experiences, I really am quite ignorant to the overall field of educational change. I couldn’t tell you any other theories or models of educational change. I can’t point to any of the other seminal people in the field. I would probably even have a hard time name in more than one or two people that are currently researching or writing in the field.

I suspect that this response is quite different than what the folks who crafted the question had intended, but I do believe that it is a reality of many researchers who work in the various aspects of educational or instructional technology. And as a special interest group in AERA, I think this admission highlights a particular challenge.
and an opportunity for those involved in this SIG. While I consider my specific field to be K-12 distance, online, and blended learning; and I would describe my broader field as educational or instructional technology; how can those who are more familiar with, and actively involved in, the field of educational change ensure that somebody like me has a greater awareness of the field and incorporate more of that literature and those ideas in my own work.

Your work on virtual high schools points to the changing role of teachers in these spaces as well as new needs in terms of supporting their efforts and the creation of meaningful courses and materials. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice to begin to address these issues?

In a face-to-face classroom environment, the teacher is responsible for evaluating and selecting resources that aid in the design of the instructional activities that take place in the classroom for their students. The teacher is responsible for enacting that instructional plan to teach the material to their students in whatever form that may take. Finally, the teacher is responsible for supporting the student as they engage with the instructional activities the teacher designed and delivered. However, the reality of the virtual school environment is that three each of these roles – in addition to others such as assessment – may be undertaken by different individuals and, at times, even the different types of technology itself that are used. One of the first researchers to explore the diffusion of the role of the teacher in the elearning environment was Niki Davis and her colleagues, as a part of the "Teacher Education Goes Into Virtual Schooling" (TEGISVS) project. As a part of that research project (see Figure 1).

In this particular context, the virtual school class is the white area with the solid line border (i.e., entitled “VS Class” or “Virtual School Class” in the figure). That virtual school class has a teacher and nine students, three from each of the three schools shown in the figure (i.e., each school is indicated by a dashed line border). Within each of the schools, there is a local facilitator to support the virtual school students. There is also a local school administration, such as a principal, vice principal, guidance counsellor, etc.; and each school also has local technical support. Finally, there is also a course designer, often a teacher or team of teachers that were responsible for designing the virtual school course in the first place.

In Figure 1, the roles of the classroom teacher described earlier have been diffused into three separate teacher roles:

- **Course Designer** – Design instructional materials. Works in team with teachers and a virtual school to construct the online course, etc.
- **Online Teacher** – Presents activities, manages pacing, rigor, etc., Interacts

Figure 1. Davis and Niederhauser (2007)
with students and their facilitators, 
Undertakes assessment, grading, etc.  
- Facilitator – Local mentor and 
avocate for students(s), Proctors & 
records grades, etc.  (Davis, 2007)

While Davis was the first to examine how 
virtual schools impacted the roles educators 
undertake in the virtual school 
environment, she was not the last (e.g., 
Ferdig, Cavanaugh, DiPietro, Black, & 
Dawson, 2009).

A more recent model looks slightly 
different, but contains many consistent 
elements.

![Figure 2. Borup, Chambers, and Stimson (2018)](image)

In this model, there are students (S) 
attending four separate schools, who are 
being taught by an online teacher (T) that 
 isn’t based in any of the four schools.  In 
each of the schools there is a mentor (M). 
As is the case with all students, in some of 
the homes there is a parent/guardian (P) 
that is able to help and provide some 
support, but in other cases that source of 
support is not available for any variety of 
reasons.

In both models, the presence of a school-
based individual (i.e., facilitator or mentor) 
is included.  Barbour and Mulcahy (2004) 
described the role of this facilitator or 
mentor as providing initial maintenance 
and troubleshooting for the technology; to 
provide support (although not academic 
support) in gaining the independent 
learning and self-motivation skills that may 
be needed to succeed in the online 
environment; and to proctor tests and 
exams, monitor student attendance and 
behavior, and provide supervision; while 
Ferdig et al. (2009) described the role as 
assisting in registering and accessing virtual 
courses, providing academic tutoring and 
assistance to students, facilitating technical 
support, and acting as an academic advisor 
to students enrolled.  In a detailed fashion, 
Borup et al. (2018) wrote this of the 
facilitator or mentor:

On-site mentors are not meant to replace 
the online teacher but to enhance and 
support the work that online teachers are 
currently doing.  On-site mentors’ physical 
presence also allows them to provide types 
of support that are difficult for online 
teachers.  More specifically, as the content 
experts, teachers are primarily charged with 
providing students with content-related 
support.  Teachers are also responsible for 
assessing students’ understanding of the 
course material and their ability to apply 
their understanding in authentic ways.  On- 
site mentors are primarily charged with 
developing relationships with students and 
motivating them to engage fully in learning 
activities.  Mentors are also charged with 
helping students develop the 
communication skills, organizational skills, 
and study skills to effectively learn online. 
When working with multiple students, 
mentors can also promote co-presence and 
collaboration...  [The online] teacher’s 
primary responsibility is to teach the 
content, and mentors’ primary
responsibilities are to ensure “everything is working smoothly and order is maintained... In practice, there is “considerable overlap” between online teachers’ and on-site mentors’ facilitating efforts, and on-site facilitators can at times act as teachers and online teachers can act as facilitators. (para. 4)

The reality of teacher education today is that very few programs - pre-service or in-service - prepare educators for any of these three roles; at least in the virtual school context. Of these three roles, the facilitator or mentor is one that is completely absent from teacher education programs.

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?

Along with the second question, this is the other question that I struggled with in my responses. The first thing that I believe those in the field of educational change could do to support individuals attempting to transform schools, schooling, and school system would be to provide an overview of some of the main theories, frameworks, and models of educational change. I’m reminded of a text that I had during my own doctoral program written by Robert Branch and Kent Gustafson that looked at models of instructional design (and earlier version of the text is available for free through ERIC). The book itself included a couple dozen models, and categorized these models based upon what you were likely to see used in or that had features consistent with classroom-oriented models, product-oriented models, and system-oriented models. The book itself was direct and straightforward, and fairly brief. It was a useful resource - both for us as beginning scholars/academics and for practitioners in the field.

The second thing that I think individuals in the field of educational change can do to assist with this process is to provide a better grounding for those involved in the practice of education as a part of their teacher training programs. Some of the basic premises of instructional design, as well as significant overviews of various educational psychology constructs, are common place in teacher education programs. One of the things that we stress in teacher education is the potential impact teachers have and their ability to make change in the teaching and learning process, as well as within their own schools and school systems. Yet we don’t equip those same teachers with the knowledge, skills, and abilities during their teacher preparation to be able to enact that kind of change – at least not in the same ways that we equip them with learning theories or motivation strategies.
Where do you perceive the field of Educational Change is going? What excites you about Educational Change now and in the future?

Given my earlier professed ignorance of most aspects of the field of educational change, I think it would be fairly audacious of me to now provide a detailed response to this question. What I can say is that I would hope that the field begins to expand its awareness and reach. Two years from now, or five years from now, I would hope that I would be able to point to specific theories or models of change – and be able to describe how I had used or seen them used in specific contexts within the K-12 distance, online, and blended learning environment. In my personal case, hopefully the exercise of participating in this interview will provide some impetus for me to become more aware of this field. But even from the standpoint of a field as a whole, educational change needs to be seen within various educational disciplines – not just educational instructional technology – in much the same way that educational psychology the seen as a guiding or overarching lens for everything that we do.

As for what might excite me about the field, based on my limited knowledge... It would probably have to be the potential the field has to engage with folks like myself, who are largely ignorant of the specifics of the discipline, to be able to apply various aspects of the field in a more informed and systematic fashion. Essentially for educational change to exist in much the same way that models of instructional design or systems for program and product evaluation have become inherently embedded, almost to the point that they’ve become second nature, to research and researchers in most educational and instructional technology disciplines. I believe there would be great potential for folks in the field of educational and instructional technology to be able to rhyme off models of educational change in the same way they can rhyme off different models of instructional design.

References


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