The 2012 AERA theme is “Non Satis Scire: To Know is Not Enough.” Your recent work “Getting Ideas into Action” proposes a new social arrangement of R&D within the education enterprise, which relates closely with this year’s meeting theme. Based on your work, how can research and practice communities work together to initiate a new R&D enterprise? Why is this new arrangement desired over the existing R&D system?

The how is multifaceted. There are a lot of hows we do not fully appreciate. The question has not been at the forefront of thinking in education long enough to have a nice, compact list. We have to discover the kinds of arrangements that can lead to work across a broad spectrum of research and practice. One key component is that we have to be intentional about melding research and practice. One clear part of intentionality is to have agreed upon problems we are trying to make progress on and agreed upon aims we are working toward.

R&D in education currently has a lot of R and a lot of D, but they are separate. The work of researchers and practitioners has been very separate, and there has been collective wishful thinking that if we learn something from research, it will somehow make its way to the practice side because the understanding is so compelling. We see it in our policy arrangements. We see this in What Works Clearinghouse.

There is a belief that if we just know if something works that this knowledge will be sufficient to get into practice. At some core level, we have been living in the world focused on what, and we believe that the how will just magically come into being. One might argue that the most difficult knowledge to unearth is the practical knowledge of how to get something into action. We have behaved as though the most difficult knowledge is what works, and while that is partially true, equally difficult is creating concrete knowledge people can use.

How are digital technologies changing students’ learning experiences inside the classroom?
Digital technologies are offering new opportunities for learning, new ways for students to work together. The question is, will we do things differently in this moment than what we have done in the past. I recently gave a lecture on our current visions of distance learning, video-based distance learning for classrooms of the future, and I actually used an example of such classrooms from 1988. While our technologies have gotten a whole lot better, the conception of how we use video for instruction has not changed over the years.

Thirty years ago, we thought that it made sense to think of technology in terms of cause and effect. I think in this moment, we do understand that technology is neither of these. It is very important to understand context, why professionals and students would engage with technology, that aspirations and capacities vary a lot, and we have to understand how to take advantage of these. We now have a much more nuanced understanding of what the take up looks like, but we still have a world where people most in control in building technical infrastructures are still divorced from the realities of education in the U.S. More sharing needs to be done to avoid mistakes from the past.

How can digital technology be used to leverage educational change on a school level?

We need to have a clear understanding of what we want students to be able to do and to have clear agreements of what school as a community is trying to accomplish. You might want to invest in technology that puts a premium on creating public spaces for students and others to make their ideas visible. So, if you have a choice between this or video connectivity, you might select to have visibility. However, each school has its own unique priorities, so being able to make claim as to where technology will add value requires that you know what you ultimately want to do.

Data drives change a lot, and one place where modern technology can help tremendously is through data analytics, to be more mindfully how you can sense from students’ activity what they are learning and having difficulty with and feeding that information quickly to faculty, students, and others. It is one of the places where rapid use of technology has changed many sectors. If we are mindful of what we want to do, technology can be very important. Students need to have technology in their hands and to work on multiple domains so instructors can sense from that technology what is going on with students.

You recently edited, Education Reform in New York City. What can education reformers in other large urban areas learn from this initiative?

First, be aggressively ambitious about what you want to accomplish, go at issues of technology, instruction, teacher leadership, and collaboration at the same time. New York was able to do that because they had strong leadership that was there for a long time. Strong leadership is second. And third, they had a good sense to stay the course.

The extent to which new reforms build on older reforms... A generation ago, most ideas on school reform came from District 2 work Anthony Alvarado led. A lot of people in New York City that led a set of reforms during the Bloomberg/Klein years came out of the District 2 experience. The human and social capital build up during those years served as a social and an intellectual infrastructure to power new and broader reforms.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?
Equality. As a nation, we can easily demonstrate that it is possible for us to educate our students so they can compete with anyone in the world. The challenge that we have to step up to is to be able to take the variability and diversity that is the United States and to be able to educate everyone at high levels. The challenge is the same that has been facing us for over three decades. Equality in educational opportunity is a big policy and a big practice challenge.

The reason we have not addressed this yet is that buried in our ethos is the confusion about equality and equity. We pay so much attention equalizing the inputs, but that is irrelevant. What we need to pay attention to is equalizing the outcomes. If we look at our diversity, we need to pay attention to how policies get customized to produce effectiveness across the variability rather than paying attention to producing effects.

The practice issue is about understanding how to be effective across broad contexts, and we have not truly recognized that because we do not have good theories about how things need to be customized and refigured across diverse contexts in this country.

I think that people currently leading policy are sensitive to these problems, and one can only hope that this sensitivity can be driven through execution. If we do believe that context varies a lot and that we need to reduce variability that causes sub-optimal outcomes, when money flows to support policies, the policies as written have to allow local actors to do things differently. Right now, lots of polices at the federal, state, and city levels have sameness built into them. It will be hard to build policies where sameness is not built into the fiber of policy.

The policy-practice infrastructure needs to be much more collaborative. Part of talking more is about re-professionalization of the practice side so when people make policy at the state houses, the policies assume that on the execution side there is a deeply reflective professional class. If we do revitalize the professional class, then the policy can assume a vibrant and reflective class of folks, and therefore, policy can have a lot less “sameness” baked into it.

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