

How Should the Educational Researcher Speak? Thoughts from a Beginning Researcher

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Understanding that researchers are already aware of the gap between theory and practice, this article seeks to add to the dialogue, through a look at the gap, relating the gap to effective communication. The article offers a brief look at effective research, including the perspective as a practitioner, as well as that of a researcher. It is not so much that the practitioner and researcher always have different views on the issues being studied, but that effective communication of the research is essential for the research to be understood and considered.

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Whether one is an educational practitioner or a researcher, there is an awareness that both roles come with responsibility and that responsibility is intertwined with the power of words. We know this through the famous words of numerous gifted orators. At the furthest extreme, words can incite hate and violence, from the narratives spoken by Hitler and Mussolini, to words that move generations, such as those spoken by Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Sir Winston Churchill. Not to trivialize their greatness by making a comparison, or to say that my words are going to inspire greatness, however, like all educational researchers, I want my words to matter to someone, in particular, educators in the field. As a beginning researcher, but a long-time practitioner, I began to wonder about the gap between researchers and practitioners.

From the perspective that researchers and practitioners come from different spaces and as such would not totally understand each other, my questions were: What is it about practitioners that I, as a researcher, have to figure out so that educators will consider what I am saying? What is it about being a researcher that I must figure out so that my message is clear? How should I, as an educational researcher, speak? I realized that I must first consider some perspective regarding gathering information.

Foucault (1972) and Latour (1993) have argued that gathering information can be somewhat complicated. However, if we, as researchers, investigate into one source, despite how valid the information that is provided, we are probably missing a point of view from that limited inquiry, from a few insights and opinions of others. The limited inquiry might reveal some awareness, but it will not help us reveal a depth of knowledge or construct a depth of knowledge. It can be assumed though, that whatever we are reading comes from a definite perspective; a personal knowledge of what is and what isn't, so that does not mean that we have not gathered any knowledge. It might even encourage us or spark us to learn more about a particular subject, which is what is done in research. However, we know that our audiences have different perspectives,

perhaps coming from a theoretical point of view, or from the view of a practitioner, or a combination of both.

Considering the process of gathering information, hooks (1994) believed that there is no gap between theory and practice. In fact, she believed that one informs the other and that theory allows us to think of things differently, from a different perspective, without any limitations. She showed us that we can think of things in a different way and act on things, and that perhaps information does not have to be too complicated like Foucault (1972) and Latour (1993) described. According to her, it is a matter of perspective.

Entwistle (2013) initiated a discussion saying that there is a gap between educational theory and practice. His initial thoughts about practitioners may be summed up as: practitioners believe theorists do not understand what education is really like first hand; practitioners do not understand the perspective of the theorists; and practitioners do not understand that it is a theory, not an exact science, application, or rule and thus requires judgment. He also stated though that “the theory is often not alright; it is misleading and inadequate theory that practitioners have a perfect right to dismiss” (Entwistle, 2013, p. 7). He comes down hard on practitioners and theorists; nevertheless, he wants to marry the two, saying that it comes down to an awareness of both practice and theory for research to be effective. Understanding the importance of having an awareness of both encouraged me to consider the perspective as a practitioner, and the perspective as a researcher.

Perspective as a Practitioner

In education it can be difficult, at the best of times, to have credibility when delivering educational research, in particular, to an audience of teachers. Justifiably though, as Labaree (2003) pointed out, “teachers take on an enormous moral responsibility to make sure that the changes they introduce are truly in the best interest of the student and not merely a matter of individual whim or personal convenience” (p. 17). Thus, the research potential may be lost if it does not relate to the practitioner. If the research does not address a priority issue, deal with an action, or answer a question; if the writing is too academic for the audience, or if there is not a relationship between the researcher and practitioner, then the research may fail (Yates, 2005).

As an example of this, MacLellan (2016) provided a transcript of his talk on the gap between teaching and education research. He shared the results of an experiment that looked at how teacher-practitioners received research. In the experiment, the teacher-practitioners received research (work published in 2007 by John Hattie and Helen Timperley), that explained how to provide student feedback. The researchers in the experiment were not looking so much at the increase in student learning, but on how the teacher-practitioners implemented the intervention, moving the theory presented to practice. MacLellan (2016) argued that student learning did not improve even though teacher-practitioners agreed with Hattie and Timperley (2007) about the impact of student feedback. MacLellan (2016) pointed out that the reason for its failure was that teacher-practitioners struggled to understand the research paper that explained Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) work. The teacher-practitioners felt it was not written for practitioners, and they did not have time to figure it out. The practitioner’s perspective was not taken into consideration.

Perspective as a Researcher

Even though I believe having experience in the field can offer perspective and depth and breadth to my educational knowledge as a researcher, I agree with Labaree (2003) that it is not enough without theory building. As well, Biesta (2006) argued that we need to look at things

differently, not just what we learned and know. Learners need to engage in dialogue or discourse that fosters alternative points of view and critical examination of the evidence. It is difficult to change someone's mind. Thus, making an idea flourish from information gathered can be a difficult task for an educational researcher. However, that is what makes research intriguing and challenging; investigating the things that do not fit and how those things can represent a breakdown in the order of how things are done, then sharing those findings and having those findings be meaningful and understood.

Researchers who have practice in the field can add another dimension to their delivery of research because they are practitioners. However, as a beginning researcher, I learned that I must embrace this notion of letting go of what I already know. For all researchers, it requires taking risks, challenging ourselves, violating our thinking on things, and interrupting our path of knowledge and belief. The knowledge that has been revealed to us, the foundation that we have relied upon and helped us understand much of what we know, may not even be true. Thus, we must question, which is what research does. I see value in the work done by theoreticians and practitioners, and I believe merging both frames of reference should not be discounted. However, as a researcher, ensuring that others understand the research is the ultimate test.

Perspective on Effective Communication

Yates (2005) argued that those doing educational research are “concerned about what it contributes to knowledge, about the quality of its methodology, and about the type of contribution it makes to the field, that it does something that matters” (p. 13). Research can inform policy, address a need, refute a claim, improve a program, and empower a group; thus, the importance of effective communication.

In any field of study however, including education, there are highly complex writers and some can write very abstractly and theoretically because they are theoreticians. I believe these writers challenge us as readers and push us to a higher level of understanding. Nevertheless, while challenging the audience to ponder certain ideals, we, as educational researchers, have to be somewhat straightforward in our delivery of research, understanding that using highly abstract and obscure language may be a tool that excludes. Not that educators cannot understand complex language, but the language used in the writing should be clear enough so that the message does not get lost.

Ultimately, I came to the understanding that there has to be a point to what we, as educational researchers, are doing, and in turn, we need to communicate what we have uncovered to an audience. If any message, theory, change, or idea is to be embraced, as a researcher speaking my claim, I must consider the perspective as a practitioner and perspective as a researcher; without losing the message that my research is important. I must understand the importance of meeting a common ground between researcher and practitioner when considering how the educational researcher should speak.

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