

The Research – Practice Connection

John M. Dirkx

Associate Professor

Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education

Co-Director

Michigan Center for Career & Technical Education

Michigan State University





Tales From a Traveling Coffee Cup





“There is nothing more practical than a good theory”





Example of Typical Questions

- An ABE Program Director asks:
“Why do our adult learners leave before they complete their goals?”
- A community college teacher asks:
“How can I deal with the wide range of age difference among learners in my classes?”



The Problem: A Tale of Two Cities

Research that often does not seem to address difficult practice problems

Practice that does not seem to integrate research findings



The practitioner's prayer:

- “Can you give me what I can use on Monday morning?”

The researcher's prayer:

- “Don't ask me questions like that!”



Reflection:

Do you think of yourself primarily as a practitioner or a researcher? Neither? Both?

Why?



Definitions

■ Research

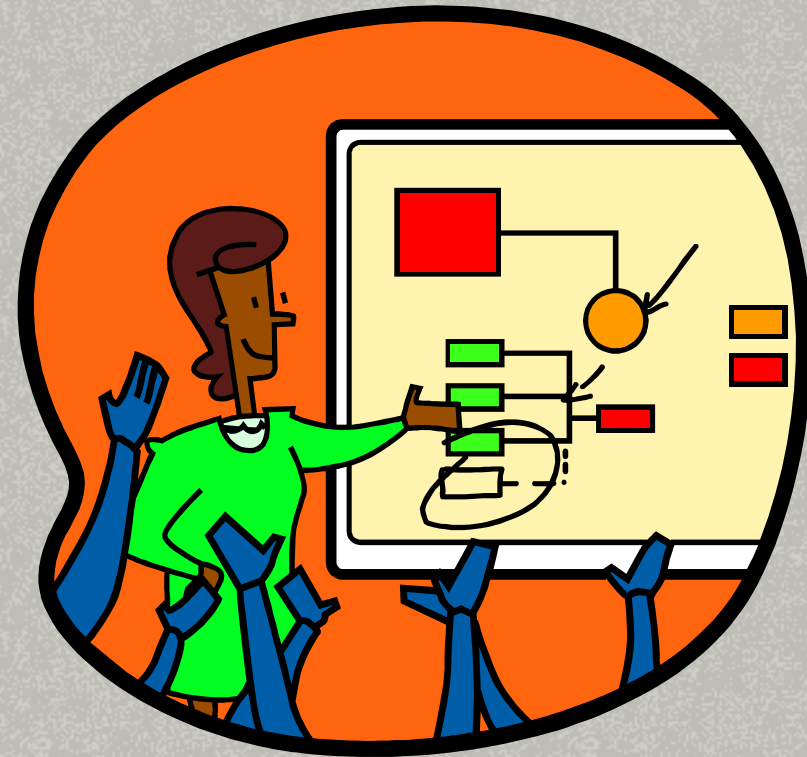
- To explain or understand
- Concern for principles and general “truths”
- Seek inter-subjectivity
- Control for difference and complexity
- The scholarly field as primary audience

■ Practice

- To bring about change
- Concern for the particular and unique
- Often embroiled in values
- Embrace difference and complexity
- The individual learner as primary audience

Research-to-Practice: The Conventional Approach

- Dissemination and update of latest research relevant to practice problems
- Research as the principles and practice as the technology
- “Best Practices” as an example of this convention





Research – to – practice:

Research → Practice



From the research-to-practice perspective, what recommendations would you make to our two practitioners?

- *Why do our adult learners leave before they complete their goals?*
- *How can I deal with the wide range of age difference among learners in my classes?*



The Research - Practice Connection





Working Within the “Interstitial Spaces”:

- Both a researcher and a practitioner
- Align with and work in a practice context
- Partner with practitioners to address concrete problems
- Allow the practice context to talk back
- Let research emerge from the practice
- Watch for broader messages
- Test the broader message within specific practice contexts



Lessons Learned From the “Interstitial Spaces”

- Research and practice are interdependent
- Focuses on specific experiences
- Grounded in particular contexts
- Intrinsically social and political
- Ongoing and lifelong



Research and practice are interdependent:

- Relationship is dynamic and dialogical
- Both are bound up with one another
- Practitioners are researchers and researchers are practitioners
- Knowledge is produced through the coming together of these two perspectives



The relationship gives voice to specific experiences:

- Theory illuminates reality: “It’s a good idea but it will never work here”
- Attending to both aspects helps identify features of context we might not see
- Realize problems are not just about being more effective, efficient, productive
- Some problems reflect knotty issues that are moral, ethical and political



The relationship is contextual and situated:

- Embedded in particular social, cultural, and political contexts
- Surfaces beliefs, values, and interests of individuals, groups, and institutions



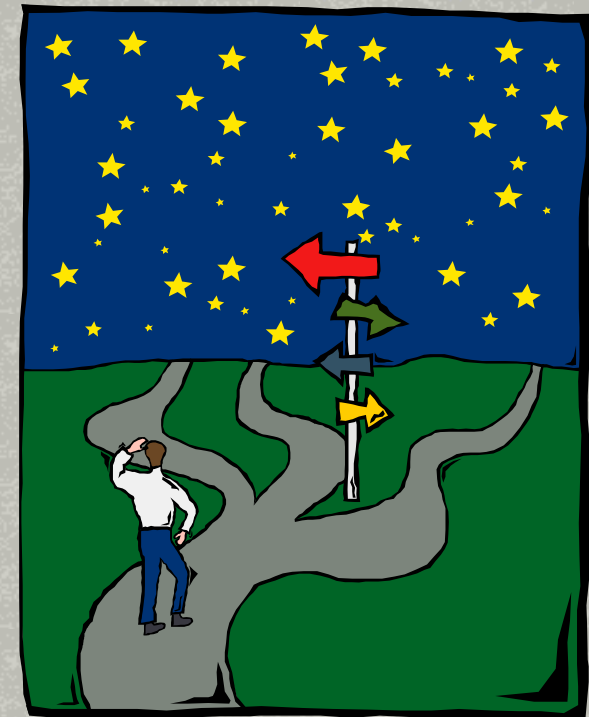
The relationship is inherently social and political:

- Reflects memberships in various practice and knowledge communities
- Involves individuals and groups in collaborative relationships
- Relationships of power shape and influence
 - meanings derived
 - the ways they come to be expressed



The relationship is ongoing and lifelong:

- Not a one-shot, plug'n play deal
- Is iterative, cyclical and dialogical
- Requires continuous commitment
- A form of lifelong learning





Revisiting our questions from the interstitial space:

- *Why do our adult learners leave before they complete their goals?*
- *How can I deal with the wide range of age difference among learners in my classes?*



So What?

Implications for our Work

Observe and listen

Read, write and reflect

Question yourself *and* authority

Collaborate with the “other”

Nurture the imagination

Don't forget the coffee!

