The Research – Practice Connection

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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?
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Practice <-> Research
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!