

Reflecting On Our Impact

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Welcome! When I was asked to prepare a “paper” to post here on the web my first reaction was – “Wait a minute. You want me to deliver a keynote address at the conference *AND* write a paper too!!! Isn’t that a bit much?” Then, after a bit of reflection, I calmed down and realized that my challenge is not to “write a paper”. Instead, I’d like to try and offer a few thoughts of my own on the topic in an attempt to encourage others to share their thoughts. I’d like to try and encourage participation. If all goes well (and I provide a few meaningful thoughts and I keep it short) we will be able to get the Midwest Research to Practice Conference dialogue started well in advance of arriving in St. Louis. Here goes –

I have a problem differentiating research from practice. They seem to be so intertwined I find it difficult to separate the two. I try not to use the word “subjects” when referring to the people my research involves. Instead I use the word “learners” in just about all situations when I refer to the people on whom my efforts focus. I find my desire to be a voyeur is very limited and I don’t have a strong need to conduct research to find out a lot of stuff about other people. What would I do with the information? However, I am interested in other people. If I’m smart I’m able to design my research with a high level of learner participation so there is no need for me to transfer my findings to others – they already know what we found. And, when I get right down to it, I’m really only interested in research that has an impact. Why would I want to waste everyone’s time doing research that doesn’t have an impact?

But wait a minute – how can I possibly be involved only in research projects that will have an impact? This seems to suggest that I have some sort of magical power to know, before a research project is selected, which one will have impact and which one won’t. Does this mean I cheat?

As I have considered this dilemma I find that my thoughts evolve around the concept of reflection (hence the title of this short paper). I think reflection is an answer for me. I not only use reflection after the fact (“What did the research accomplish?”), I also rely on reflection before the fact (“Will this type of research be a worthwhile investment for me and others?”) If my reflection becomes a public and highly participatory process, conducted with the others involved with the research, there’s a good chance that my impact concerns will be fulfilled. I am challenged to find ways to allow everyone a chance to steer the research toward an area that will have impact.

As a dissertation advisor I find that the most exciting part of my role is the pre-research time that is devoted to joining with my doctoral advisee in reflecting on his/her dissertation research project. Sometimes this before-the-fact reflection process takes more time than actually conducting the research. But that’s okay. I think research projects that have an impact take time.

Okay, enough wandering. What do you think? How does reflection play a role in your research? Are you only concerned with research that has an impact? How do you ensure that your research has an impact? I look forward to hearing the thoughts of others and I invite each of you to share your thoughts. Try to keep them short (it encourages others to react), don’t be afraid to walk out on “thin ice” (it’s more fun to read comments that force us to stretch a bit), and come back here often to see what is being shared.

All the best –

Joe