Knowledge transformation and impact

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EDITORIAL

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This special issue builds on the *Cambridge Journal of Education*'s long-standing commitment to promoting 'shared understanding among academic researchers, theorists, practising teachers, policy-makers and educational administrators'. How then, we ask, can we improve communication? How can researchers build on the knowledge which educational practitioners and policy makers have? How can we transform relatively technical forms of research knowledge so that it really can 'make a difference' in practice and policy fields?

This special issue has its origins in a working group of the UK's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). TLRP is the UK's largest ever investment in coordinated educational research and has developed through a series of funding competitions that began in 2000 and will extend to 2012. The diversity of the Programme's portfolio might seem to defy coherence (see www.tlrp.org) – but, as Andrew Pollard's introductory paper clearly demonstrates, this is not the case. Two particular goals stand out. First, all 70 projects reflect the Programme's aim of 'improving outcomes for learners'. Second, TLRP has been resolutely committed to the direct application, for policy and practice, of the high quality social science which it supports. In furthering the latter cause, TLRP developed coherent plans for 'knowledge transformation and impact' from its inception, and has actively contributed to debates and experimentation on these issues ever since. This special issue is the latest of such contributions and features authors who have actively contributed to TLRP's work over the period.

Of course, concepts such as 'transformation' and 'impact' are not unproblematic and Michael Fielding (2003, p. 289) warned as follows:

> My sense is that [the term 'impact'] valorises what is short term, what is readily visible and easily measurable. My sense is also that it has difficulty comprehending and valuing what is complex and problematic; what is uneven and unpredictable, what requires patience and tenacity. My sense is that it finds difficulty in distinguishing between levels of change, between what is fairly superficial and what is, to coin another over-used, increasingly presumptuous phrase 'transformational' between what, in the management literature, is second-order rather than first-order change.

We therefore need to be extremely careful. And yet we are, unashamedly, interested in the contribution which educational research can make to our society. To the extent that the forms in which it has traditionally been communicated limit such contributions, then we are interested in understanding the constraints and exploring what might be done to improve the situation. We do not limit the audience for educational research to academic peers, very significant though they may be. How, additionally, might we communicate effectively with practitioners, policymakers, journalists, opinion leaders and others in the public realm?

This collection brings together many of those who have been at the cutting edge of analysis and practice in respect of these issues in the last decade – all of whom have contributed to debates on these issues within TLRP.

Andrew Pollard's paper reviews the TLRP's aspirations, strategies and provision. He shows how the Programme has tried to reach out to different audiences and some of the challenges which became apparent in so doing. His conclusion, that work on transformation and impact is a highly professional activity needing a significant infrastructure and specialist forms of expertise, leads him to call for the establishment of some form of publicly funded evidence centre. In this conception, knowledge about education, like clean, running water and other services, is seen as a necessary public good for a modern, democratic society.

Of the papers that follow, each has chosen to challenge us in quite specific ways and they range across a variety of change contexts and processes in education. However, in so doing, more generic issues are drawn out. For example, three key challenges are apparent: how to transform research findings beyond abstract academic forms; how to exploit ideas that are culturally and politically current; and how to ensure the authentic engagement of users.

The paper from Iram Siraj-Blatchford and her colleagues concerns an extensive programme of work in the field of early years education – the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (DfES-funded but affiliated to TLRP). The benefits of large-scale, longitudinal and closely coordinated research over a significant period of time (10 years to date) are here revealed for all to read. Siraj-Blatchford and her colleagues compellingly set out the multi-level and multi-faceted impacts of the EPPE's research programme on the UK's education systems and further afield. They show that the foundation of high impact must be the excellence of the research itself, and the quality of the warrant for that research which can be demonstrated. Strong user engagement then unlocks opportunities to make a real difference in policy and practice.

One aspect of the underpinning coherence of TLRP has been its rigorous pursuit of user engagement. Indeed, it has strongly influenced ESRC's requirement that applicants for awards demonstrate not just engaging users in the proposed outworking of the research but – and this is arguably a first – that they have also consulted users in designing it. The challenge and rationale for effective user engagement is comprehensively set out in Philippa Cordingley's paper. No punches are pulled as she argues that 'academic writers need to have a practitioner learning perspective in view as they write'. Partly, this is an issue of language, though in a different sense from that of Fielding. Here the issue is plain English and the need to break away from the inward-looking jargon of a research culture that often prefers the refuge of such complex concepts as 'ontology' and 'epistemology' over the need to make meaning for audiences that have not had the benefits of sociological or psychological training. But ultimately, Cordingley's paper challenges educational research to listen to, and engage more fully with, a variety of emerging approaches to sharing new knowledge and insights with the wider educational (practitioner and professional) community.

Research-informed practice is a theme continued by Sandra Nutley and her colleagues in a paper that is illustrated by two innovative examples of how research is shared to good effect in the practice context. Taking elements of the linear and interactive models of making use of research, they propose a framework that can help researchers with deciding how best to transform research findings into knowledge that informs both practice and policy.

Picking up on the latter, Richard Daugherty's paper provides a fascinating insight into how research, properly presented and reviewed, can have significant impact on policy. Eschewing the simple notion of a process that creates new knowledge and then evaluates its implications with a view to informing policy, Daugherty's case study argues that the process of transforming policy on assessment in Wales has been more of a multi-perspective consideration of 'Where do we go from here?' In this type of process, academics and academic research take their places along with practitioners and policy makers in using evidence to engage with new ideas and ultimately new policy and practice.

The final two papers look at two different sides of the multi-sided impact coin. John Gardner and his colleagues walk the thin line of what some might see as heresy and what others see as a respectable alternative form of evidence. Normally anecdotal, impressionistic and subjective evidence gets a relatively dismissive press; indeed the words themselves often carry the shadow of academic disdain. But Gardner et al. argue that such evidence can be bona fide indicators of impact, especially in circumstances where much-vaunted 'measurement' or systematic qualitative inquiry is impractical or inappropriate. Their message is simple. It is time that the subjective interpretations, impressions and reactions, of those upon whom research and policy impacts, are given due weight in assessing impact; and the paper provides indications that these voices are beginning to be heard.

In the last, but not by any means least, paper, Tim Oates casts an analytical perspective on an issue that seems obvious with hindsight but which has, arguably more than any other cause, constrained many significant education innovations from making it to successful, sustained policy and practice. The underlying issue, he argues, is timing – or as he more precisely puts it 'temporal discontinuity' – a complex concept that speaks to the inadequate synchronisation of design, piloting, evaluation and implementation in transforming new knowledge to successful changed practice. Using three major initiatives as case studies he illuminates how such timing-related problems can frustrate what might otherwise be significant transformational changes in education.

We are grateful to Conor Galvin and Martin Ince for rounding off the issue for us by reviewing the papers and providing perspectives on them as a whole. Galvin prefaces his commentary with a challenging statement: 'But all the wrong people were there…', an insight into how one of the new policy workers of today viewed the task of making better policy for education in a room full of academic policy researchers and government officials. Ince in turn gives a journalist's perspective on the matters these papers address, matters that headline the news media almost daily. While he offers a dose of realism as educational research struggles to be noticed by politicians wrestling with 'raising standards', he is also optimistic. We are certainly beginning to understand the nature of the challenges which have to be faced by those who aspire to transform knowledge and make an impact.

TLRP is grateful to the *Cambridge Journal of Education* for providing the vehicle of this special issue to promote consideration of this extremely worthwhile topic further. Academic development is a little like a relay race, and we hope that others will build on the efforts of today, and move things forward for tomorrow. Perhaps then our societies will be able to learn more from what we think we know, but have hitherto been far too ineffective at communicating.

Reference

Fielding, M. (2003). The impact of impact. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *33*(2), 289–295.

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