Why are we waiting? Education research and the lethargy of change

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Introduction

If there was a moment when our crisis in education hit critical mass it may well have been the date Sir Ken Robinson’s TED talk went up on YouTube. In just 19 minutes his wry but eviscerating presentation gave voice to what so many of us are living through: our schools are failing to recognize creativity; we’re failing to prepare the next generation for the challenges that lie ahead.

(YouTube Comments for Robinson’s 2014 TED presentation, Can Creativity Be Taught, accessed 15 October 2015, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlBpDggX3iE)

Education is now a central preoccupation of every country, but almost everywhere is in a state of crisis and demands immediate attention to ways and means of replacing inflexibility with innovation and outmoded ideas with fresh approaches.

(Perkins, 1968)

It seems apparent, in these difficult and changing times, that we face a collapsing and increasingly irrelevant school education system, which is condemning students currently in school to a life of uncertainty and disillusion. The sky is falling and, as indicated by Perkins above, this has been the case since at least 1968. So how did we get to here? Why, despite years of research conducted into education by universities and governments, and millions of dollars spent on professional development in schools, are we still in ‘crisis’?
In this paper I discuss the current approaches toward educational research, as applied in both the university and school sectors. I also explore the role that the current school model of professional development plays, in failing to introduce effective and meaningful pedagogic change in schools. I argue that the time has come for a new and truly innovative paradigm to be introduced to schools, giving both support and responsibility to those who understand teaching on a day-to-day basis, the teachers. This new paradigm will require two major attitudinal shifts from teachers and school management.

Firstly, stakeholders will need to break down the silos that exist – vertically between year levels, and horizontally between subjects – within schools.

Secondly, schools will need a change in mindset, from being research consumers to becoming research activists. This paper presents a new model, Pop Up Pedagogy, based on work in fields as diverse as medicine and town planning, which currently is being trialled at Geelong Grammar School, a large independent school in Victoria.

Publish or perish: Education research in universities

The original purpose of universities was to be teaching institutions, gathering the best minds and exposing them to new thoughts and ideas. The idea that academics would conduct research was introduced in Germany in the late nineteenth century. Following World War II, and the need for nation rebuilding, the shift toward research gathered pace. The dividing line between teaching and research is now fully established. The current university construct is one in which the two worlds are designed not to meet. This paper is not an attempt to redesign the university model, however it is important to understand the framework in which academics operate.

As with many other institutions receiving government funding, universities have needed to become increasingly self-reliant in terms of income stream. The sourcing of income is from three main areas: enrolments, publications and grants. It is the processes of publishing and receiving grants that are worthy of deeper analysis. Academics employed by universities are rated on an ongoing basis according to the level of journal in which they publish, and the amount of research funding that they attract in grants. What is of most concern in terms of research, not only in education but in other fields, is the time involved in these processes. A typical process, from idea to classroom, based on this author’s experience and from consultation with fellow academics, is described below.

Step 1: The idea

Academics tend to focus their publishing within a fairly narrow area of expertise. An idea for a journal article is usually based upon the following two premises.

1. How will this support their previously published work? and
2. In what level of journal could the article be published?

Academics are expected to achieve a certain level of ‘research points’ in any year. Journals are ranked in a variety of ways, the most common being their ‘impact factor’ – the number of times an article has been cited in other journals over a period of time, usually twelve to twenty-four months (see unimelb.libguides.com/research_impact). Under this system, there is no disincentive for authors to cite their own work; academics can essentially piggyback their way to a list of citations over a period of time, thus becoming leading researchers in their field. However, while it is true that some journals are regarded more highly than others, the journal ranking system was abandoned in Australia early in 2010.
Google Scholar is attempting to develop a more transparent and equitable process to give an accurate guide as to the worth of research, but this system is yet to be implemented by universities.

With those considerations in place, the process of writing an article can begin. This is in the hands of the author, but actually constitutes a small part of the journey. Upon completion the article is then sent for review. Standard practice for ‘blind’ peer-based review is for three reviewers to read and critique the article and return it to the editors. It is extremely rare for an article to go through to publication unchanged and, even after being accepted, it can be more than a year from submission to publication. If an article requires major changes, this time can be at least doubled, depending upon the speed of the reviewers. Alternatively the article may be rejected, in which case the process must begin again with another journal. It is not inconceivable that a paper may be three years old before it is published.

**Step 2: The grant**

With some publications in place, it is now possible to conduct some empirical research. Bearing in mind this paper is about classroom pedagogy, the research process also needs to be understood. Experimental research requires a number of components, including an intervention, measures and subjects. Evidence is required for the intervention, usually from peer-based journals (see the process outlined above); evidence is required for the measures to be used for pre-testing and post-testing, usually an experiment in which they were validated, which means a pilot study of some kind; and subjects require ethics approval. Each of these steps requires either time or money – enter the world of grants.

Each year academics around the country look to see which grants are available to fund their research. These range from the largest, available from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)\(^1\), to grants from government and a range of other sources. Typically each grant generally takes four-to-six weeks of mid-year writing, for grants available in the next calendar year. Consequently there is no actual funding for nine-to-twelve months. In many cases, it can be over two years between conceiving an idea and seeing research support. If the proposal is rejected it is usually too late to apply for an alternative grant.

Implicit in each of the two processes above is the presumption that academia runs like a well-oiled machine and is free of bias at each stage of the process.

> In many cases, it can be over two years between conceiving an idea and seeing research support.

**Step 3: The project**

Having received the appropriate funding, it is now time to begin the research. Once again, it must be presumed that the place where the research is being conducted still has the same management team and level of interest in pursuing the project, and that the research is still relevant to their needs and context. It is also necessary to obtain ethics approval from the university Ethics Committee, which, depending on the type of research, can take anywhere from one month to over a year if revisions need to be made. In addition, given that research in schools is using minors, it is also necessary to obtain written parental consent on an approved form before the project can commence.

Once the bureaucratic protocols are in place, the timing for the research needs to be found. Schools are busy places and teachers are busy people. Finding staff willing to try and fit new pedagogic practice into their work is sometimes not easy. (This will be explored further in the section on professional development.) Finding time within a school year, for an uninterrupted sequence of lessons in which the study can take place, can also be difficult. The idea of conducting research in the final two years of schooling – with the perceived pressures of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) –
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