

Negotiating Problems of Practice in Research-Practice Design Partnerships

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Executive Summary

In this chapter, we develop conceptual frameworks for understanding how researchers and practitioners negotiate the focus of their joint work. Understanding how researchers and practitioners decide upon the focus and organization of joint work is important to the development of DBIR as an approach to research, because the first principle of DBIR is that it should focus on jointly negotiated, persistent problems of practice (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011). We offer two different approaches to analyzing these negotiations: cultural exchange theory and frame theory. We illustrate each framework with a case example to illustrate aspects of negotiation in partnerships that the framework helps to illuminate, as well as what aspects are put into the background. Together, these frameworks and analyses highlight the ways that authority, status, and cultural norms of researchers and practitioners each influence how partnerships define problems and the kinds of strategies they pursue to address those problems.

Cultural Exchange Theory

Cultural exchange theory calls attention to the ways that people at the intersection of two different subcultures coordinate work and sometimes create new forms of social practice, that is, linked activities with distinct norms, tools, and rules for thinking, speaking, and acting together. It has been applied to study partnerships in social services as a way to conceptualize the relation between researchers and practitioners (Palinkas et al., 2009). In education, attention to the distinctive cultural practices of researchers and practitioners calls attention to the need for spaces and tools that enable these two groups to collaborate effectively.

One approach is to create what Galison (1997) calls a *trading zone*. These are social spaces where people can debate and exchange ideas, and they are also material spaces where people

engage in various forms of “place-making:” building collaboratories, creating new types of organizations, and organizing coalitions for action or reform. This is the approach taken by a research-practice partnership of district leaders and teachers from Bellevue (WA) public schools and researchers at the University of Washington. In this partnership, a team of researchers, district staff, and teachers repurposed a widely-used kit-based science curriculum unit; teachers then enacted the unit, and a design team studied its impact and made revisions on the basis of what they learned. Key to the success of the effort was creating a formal design process for exchanging ideas and a language for talking about the designs they were developing and testing in classrooms.

Framing Theory

Frame analysis provides a way to understand how ideas are produced and invoked to mobilize people to action (Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Developing a course of action, making a policy, or developing an intervention requires that individuals and groups explicitly or implicitly identify a problem to be solved and link that problem to a solution. How a particular problem is defined or “framed” is crucial, for it assigns responsibility and creates rationales that authorize some solutions and not others (Benford & Snow, 2000; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The framing of problems within research-practice partnerships is especially critical to re-organizing the relations between research and practice within design-based implementation research, because the frames negotiated explicitly name particular groups of researchers or practitioners as responsible for designing and implementing solutions.

Frame analysis was useful for interpreting a second case study focused on the Partnership for District Reform (PDR). PDR was a foundation-funded initiative that brought together an

external research organization with a diverse, mid-size urban school district to foster the development of the district as a learning organization, with the goal of creating the conditions for evidence-based practice in support of district-wide instructional improvement. The collaborative work in the initiative called for district and external partners to collaboratively identify problems and develop and implement solutions that would be informed by research but adapted to local conditions and capacities. This approach emphasized the importance of both research and clinical knowledge for solving the problems the district faced.

In the PDR, both authority and status shaped the frames that were taken up by stakeholders in the partnership. Participants with authority had greater influence over which frames were taken up in discussion as the basis for action, as well as greater influence over negotiations about the focus of joint work of researchers and district personnel. Those with status relative to the problem being discussed also were influential, but less so unless they also had formal authority.

Future Design-based Implementation Research on Tools and Practices of Negotiation

These conceptual frameworks and case examples can inform a program of design-based implementation research in this area that aims not just at documenting but also at *improving* the quality and effectiveness of negotiation within partnerships. In articulating this program, we draw on the experience of the third author in forming and maintaining partnerships from the standpoint of district leaders. The areas we articulate below are linked directly to challenges he has experienced, as well as to the analytic tools we have introduced and that have been useful for studying negotiation in partnerships. We envision these as general strategies for improvement and—in keeping with DBIR's focus on research—potential objects of research within research-practice-partnerships.

We highlight five key strategies in the chapter. The first is to define clear roles and lines of authority for action. Second is to cultivate routines and practices that enable collaborative design. Third is to anticipate what might be challenging to partners in establishing a new relationship, based on past individual and institutional history. Fourth is to involve people in the negotiation at multiple levels of systems. Finally, partnerships should construct multiple frames for describing the work being undertaken that can be used in different settings.

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