Overcoming Common Barriers to Research Use

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Ronald Dietel and Barbara McKenna

Abstract

The life of much education research can be short and inglorious, often culminating with publication in a third-choice journal or a presentation in a half-empty room. Even the most sound and relevant research may remain unused if it isn't well packaged and disseminated. This paper identifies common barriers to the effective dissemination of educational research, what strategies researchers and communicators might develop and use to give research better legs and a longer shelf life, and ways to ensure that it reaches those who will use it to affect policy and practice, especially to improve educational success for disadvantaged children. The authors discuss strategies for amplifying impact by understanding audiences and the media, developing powerful messages, and using social media tools to expand outreach and measure impact.

Theoretical framework

The historical difficulty in communicating education research knowledge to public, policy, and practitioner audiences is well documented (Atkinson & Jackson, 1992; Bransford, Stipek, Vye, Gomez, & Lam, 2009; Campbell, 1975; Crandall, 1989; Cross, 1990, 1991; Hood, 1989; Hutchins, 1989; Kaestle, 1993; Owens, 1988; Price, 1984; Salmon-Cox, 1981; Sharp & Frankel, 1979). The Campbell Report (1975), for example, criticized dissemination efforts of the National Institute of Education (NIE) and its associated research centers and regional educational laboratories for reasons that may sound as familiar today as they did 38 years ago.¹

¹National education research centers were first established under the Cooperative Research Act in 1963-64 while the first regional laboratories were authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Act in 1965-1966. Twenty regional labs and 14 research centers were funded in the mid-1960s under institutional grants or contracts. (Source: Center for Leadership Development, Los Angeles, CA 1984)
We understand the political pressure for “dissemination” of the results of R&D, but we conclude that NIE has done little to attack the problem as a substantive matter or cluster of issues and competing conceptualizations. We do not think that work in the field can be halted until theory catches up, but we do believe an experimental attitude would be helpful even as action goes forward, and that diverse groups within NIE could be brought together more directly to consider paradigms for change and the various roles of “dissemination” within them. Research on knowledge-utilization could be more extensively funded as an essential basis for policy in this area.

One of the occasional ideas for improving research use has been to fund a research center dedicated to dissemination and the use of knowledge, such as a 1990 proposal for the Center for Research on Dissemination and Knowledge Utilization (Klein & Gwaltney, 1990). Neither that center (Louis, 1992) nor any related dissemination center has ever been funded.

An article in Educational Researcher, The Awful Reputation of Education Research (Kaestle, 1993), pointed to the historical dilemma in trying to disseminate research findings, exemplified by the comments of a former OERI assistant secretary in the late 1980s.

It isn’t easy to reach the classroom. Chester Finn, former head of OERI and the chief author of the famous What Works pamphlet of 1986, questions the pamphlet’s efficacy, even though it was widely heralded and a half million copies were distributed. Its 41 findings, Finn says, “were validated by quite a lot of research, peer reviewed, signed off on by senior people in the field...and written in English.” It got “maximum White House hoopla.” A year later, Finn had lunch with 18 high school principals in San Diego. He held up a copy of What Works and asked how many had seen it and used it. Four had heard of it, two had seen it, and one of those two had discussed it at a faculty meeting. “The conclusion I draw from this,” said Finn, “is that the print and the dissemination media, no matter how skillfully
done, won’t work. Therefore, dissemination of educational research, if it’s to be done, has to be done some other way…. I’m almost in despair on this subject, absolutely stymied.

In his 2007 opinion article, *Education Research Could Improve Schools, But Probably Won’t*, Ronald Wolk, a member of the National Research Council’s Strategic Education Research Partnership\(^2\) program and founding editor of *Education Week*, restated many of the well-known reasons for why research doesn’t have the desired impact on teaching and learning.

“Research is not readily accessible—either physically or intellectually—to the potential users. Summaries of major studies appear in periodicals like *Education Week*, but the detailed results (usually written for other researchers in academic-speak) are usually available only in separate reports or in relatively low-circulation journals that don’t reach those who most need to know.” (Wolk, 2007).

A recurring issue is the complex language inherent in most education publications that tend to deflect public and policy interest (Weiss, 1989; Kaestle, 1993). Researchers themselves admit that “...we academic types can be long-winded, reliant on jargon, and given to tangent or an endless loop of qualification and nit-picking” (Rose, 2010).

As Rose implies, another common barrier is that education research is often inconclusive or that positive findings are couched in overly cautious conditions such as small sample sizes or the nefarious words, “more research is needed.”

Other research-use obstacles include lack of researcher knowledge about communications methods, rapidly changing communications technology and fear that findings will be misinterpreted by the media (Crosswaite & Curtice, 1994). A further hurdle is that many funding agencies do not include high expectations for dissemination or supplemental funding.

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\(^2\) For more information about the Strategic Education Research Partnership, see http://www.serpinstute.org/2013/
that goes beyond a basic research report, journal article, or conference presentation. These barriers often mean that research quickly disappears into the recesses of research literature with little impact and, more importantly, little educational change (Dietel, 2007). The substantial breadth and diversity of intended audiences—often including policymakers, practitioners, and the public, sometimes each with varying interests—is another common barrier (Cross, 1990; Willinsky, 2001).

Implementation issues are equally complex, given both limited budgets for dissemination, the large numbers of school districts and schools to reach, and time shortages: i.e., needing to move onto the next research project and with dissemination often considered only at the end of a project. Yet another major hurdle is that most research findings themselves have either no impact, little impact, or differential impact in different schools, which reduces the perceived need for dissemination (Dietel, 1999; Weiss, 1989). This particular barrier unfortunately fails to recognize the benefit that research lacking positive findings may in fact prevent the implementation of ineffective strategies or products, itself a valuable product of research.

Another common barrier to research use is lack of familiarity with the many diverse ways to promote its use. For example, while many businesses and even academic fields have broadly embraced new online social media including blogs, Twitter, Facebook, iTunes, and YouTube, educators have been slow to incorporate new media into their dissemination (Baker, 2012). Not only are opportunities lost, but education research continues its reputation of limited relevancy and impact.

Other fields take a more proactive research use approach. The International Centre for Development-Oriented Research in Agriculture, for example, “promotes the integration of stakeholder concerns, knowledge, action and learning around a theme of mutual interest" (Mulhall, December 6, 2012). The general concept is to involve non-researchers in the research process. In the agricultural field this includes farmers, entrepreneurs, environmentalists, and journalists, says Abby Mulhall from the Institute of Development Studies. In education, action
research is a comparable concept, often including practitioners in the design of the study. But the more common approach remains the same, relegating most practitioners to the side role of being subjects of a study rather than active participants.

Other common stumbling blocks include poor prioritization of research findings, lack of consideration for audience and relevance, and neglecting to connect findings to real-world concerns. A related challenge is that education has yet to regain its momentum as a key issue for the American public, replaced instead by economic conditions, entitlements, and Iran according to a Fall 2012 Gallup Poll (Saad, 2012). That seems unlikely to change with the recent saber rattling of North Korea, whose leader verbally threatens to attack the United States by any means possible including nuclear weapons.

A lesser but still important challenge for education research dissemination has been the decrease in education print publications. While education blogs have substantially increased, it has been countered with the drawdown of education news articles and drop in numbers of education reporters. The Los Angeles Times for example, used to have a complete section dedicated to education news, but that section was eliminated in a series of cutbacks more than 5 years ago.

Another major barrier to effective research use is that very few education programs include specific training in how to effectively communicate research. A review of the seven top graduate school schools of education as listed by Newsweek magazine found just one course among more than 1,200 that concentrated on effective communications of educational research (Dietel & De Cenzo, 2008). Without effective dissemination, important research may never reach beyond a small group of peers who subscribe to the academic outlets where research is most commonly shared.

Another barrier is that the federal government, in addition to showing little interest in funding a dissemination research center, has shifted their funding away from large research centers
toward more field initiated projects. The key advantage of a large research center is that its sheer size can provide the opportunity for funding a dissemination program, which was in fact mandated in the 1990 Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) centers competition that required each research center to have dissemination directors. This requirement eventually led to a center communicators group that helped to share successful dissemination strategies across approximately 20 R&D centers. Smaller, field initiated studies with more modest budgets, often lack a dissemination function other than deliverables and inclusion of research into the ERIC system. While federal mandates are often disdained by researchers, they do have impact. In 2005, federally funded comprehensive centers were required to immediately create web sites, and virtually all centers had web sites operational within the first few months of funding.

**From Barriers to a Theory of Action**

In summary, common barriers to effective research use include:

- inconclusive research findings;
- excessive caveats applied to relevant findings;
- weak expectations for what dissemination can do;
- failure to target audiences that both need and will do something with the findings;
- lack of translating research into understandable language;
- shortage of time;
- lack of dissemination funding;
- overly broad audiences;
- too many of audiences;
- lack of knowledge, interest, or early involvement from potential research users;
- slowness for embracing newer communication technologies;
- and neglecting to connect findings to the real world.

The remainder of this paper explores specific strategies for overcoming the numerous barriers to the effective use of educational research, ranging from the identification of key audiences to
the strategies themselves, and measurement of impact. We do not posit to have answers for every barrier or challenge, but believe that our joint experiences in the communications field for many years may be worth consideration, at least as a small part of what needs to be a much larger effort.

Our primary focus is on two early stages of research use: awareness and motivation. Awareness is making potential users aware of the research or product whereas motivation focuses on the creation of a positive attitude or engagement with the research. In our simple research use model below, awareness and motivation are precursors to actual use.

**Figure 1: Research Use Model**

1. AWARENESS
2. MOTIVATION
3. DECISION
4. ADAPTATION
5. USE
6. EVALUATION
7. FEEDBACK

- **Awareness**: Taking steps to communicate research to targeted audiences
- **Motivation**: Making research relevant and actionable so that audiences form positive beliefs about the research and consider using it
- **Decision**: Making the decision to do something with the research
- **Adaptation**: Adapting research findings for specific users' needs or wants; Adaptations
may come from the researcher, the user, or an intermediary source

• *Use*: The actual implementation of research in any of a broad variety of forms
• *Evaluation*: Measuring expected changes stemming from the use of the research
• *Feedback*: Using evaluation findings to adapt research or its direct use.

Again, this paper primarily focuses on the early phases of research use, which many would label as communications or marketing rather than actual research use.

**Research Use Questions**

The following are the central questions addressed in the remainder of this paper.

1. **Existing Communications Strategies for Specific Audiences:**
   
   *What communications strategies overcome barriers and effectively broadcast research that results in action?*

2. **New Communications Strategies**
   
   *What new strategies show reasonable probability of overcoming traditional barriers of effective research dissemination and action?*

**Methods**

This paper draws upon multiple sources including major reports and their findings on the use and impact of research on policy and practice, plus evidence derived from each author’s 20-plus years of experience in research communications. Among the key data sources are findings from research-use studies including papers funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, *Focusing on Demand: Studying the Use of Research Evidence in Policy and Practice Affecting Youth (2008).*

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Other sources include articles, reports, and literature on effective communications and social media, such as *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Thrive and Others Die* (Heath & Heath, 2007) and *Drive* (Pink, 2011).

Findings

**Question 1: Existing Strategies for Specific Audiences**

*What communications strategies overcome barriers and effectively broadcast research that results in action?*

Because our primary purpose is to create awareness and interest, we primarily focus this section on known successful strategies for a number of distinctly different audiences: news media, teachers, and policymakers. We also discuss methods for reaching an undefined audience, one that we often refer to as the “All” audience.

**Audience: Media**

Why are a handful of researchers quoted on what seems to be an endless basis while most others never get a phone call?

We posit that there tend to be five influential elements or processes for effective news media outreach:

1) **Your story must matter**

A good story generally beats any other factor. By good, we mean that it has a connection to the intended audience and something that will rouse readers. An evaluation of a program that increased test scores is far more likely to result in a news story than an evaluation of a program that did little or nothing to improve scores. Without a connection to an issue the intended audience cares about, a report or presentation is not very likely to become a story. In cases
where research has failed to produce a substantially positive effect, researchers might review their work with an eye toward promoting the most positive impacts, if they exist. (See Appendix A for a list of useful measures of newsworthiness)

2) **Develop relationships with reporters**
As explained by Mulhall (2012), ongoing relationships with media are important. If reporters know you and your work, they will call on you when they are on deadline. For example, several years ago, CRESST hosted an annual one-day meeting for California reporters to help them better understand the meaning of test scores. Along with providing professional development, the event served to connect them with the key accountability expert at the California State Department of Education and CRESST researchers. When state test scores were released, reporters, often working on tight deadlines, knew exactly who to call. More importantly, it made reporters working on stories familiar not just with CRESST research but with our research experts.

3) **Get to know your resident communications experts**
Many researchers don't have the expertise to self-promote, especially early in their careers. Few are lucky enough to have dedicated communications staff. If this is true for you, turn to the communications staff serving your department or school and build relationships with them. Familiarize them with your work, send them updates when you have a new report or article being released, write an op-ed and ask them to help you place it. Don't be frustrated when they edit. Communicators usually know what works in the mainstream media and what doesn’t. But, watch for the overzealous communicator who edits in a way that changes meaning.

Department or school communicators usually receive frequent calls from reporters wanting experts to inform their breaking news. By making yourself and your research known to your communications office, you increase the chances of being referred to reporters.
4) Be available and accessible

Availability is extremely important to reporters, especially those working on a tight deadline. Researchers who make themselves immediately or quickly available to reporters get quoted. If it takes more than a few hours for a reporter to reach you, your chances of being quoted in a story are fairly non-existent. If you’re not often at your desk, an effective practice is to explicitly say something to the effect, “If you’re a reporter on a deadline, please call my cell phone: 555-555-5555.” Reporters are increasingly using email, so an automated reply with the same message can help if you’re not checking email frequently.

5) Eschew academic language (AKA: speak in plain English)

Academia trains us to take speak in what could generously be called discipline-specific language or, less generously, academic jargon. It also trains us to dissect concepts thoroughly and carefully and to travel down long and nuanced paths to get to the point. Use these practices with reporters and you guarantee that you will not get quoted and only frustrate a person who has three hours to write and file a story. Reporters need to translate your research for a lay audience. The more that you can convert academic language to lay language, connect your research in a legitimate way with their story, and get directly to the point, the more likely you are not only to get quoted, but to get called the next time the reporter needs a source. (See Appendix B for a comprehensive list of tips for working with the media.)

Audience: Teachers

Any research use effort that intends to go beyond the awareness and motivation stages is likely to include teachers. Because they have direct contact with students they are the group with the greatest possible research-use impact. However, changing teacher beliefs on a broad basis may be the most difficult challenge encountered by researchers. After just a few years on the job, most teachers have witnessed at least one research-based reform that has been poorly implemented, fizzled out, or been replaced by a new research-based reform. Understandably, they can become a skeptical audience.
Consequently, we believe that fostering interest and positive beliefs about research should begin in the pre-service years, well before teachers are actually teaching. Teacher development programs should help pre-service teachers:

- understand the characteristics of high quality research;
- understand the connection and contribution of quality research to quality teaching;
- know how to find quality research;
- be able to identify quality research and to understand the various research sources they will encounter, e.g., think-tanks, non-profit advocacy organizations, independent researchers, university researchers, teachers as researchers, and professional research organizations;
- understand the challenges of transferring research into the classroom;
- have knowledge for successfully applying research to instruction.

Professional development for post-service teachers is equally important, but might more likely focus on recent research applied to specific topics, such as instructional practice and assessment.

**Audience: Policymakers**

A key difference between policymakers’ needs for information compared to other audiences is that policymakers often need information immediately, in many cases within 24 hours or less. The shortness of time may be driven by a number of factors, including sudden unexpected changes to legislation or even presentation of information counter to a policymaker’s position, for which they need opposing research or data to support their own policy. In the respect that they often need research information immediately, the policymaker audience resembles the media audience. But the policymaker, or in most cases his or her aide, often needs research information to support an existing belief or purpose, rather than looking merely for unbiased research. And the exact purpose may not be explicitly clear because in most cases the researcher is not talking directly to the user but indirectly to an aide or assistant who either has
less information than the actual user or less than willing to provide it.

The above is not always the case of course. For example, the National Conference of State Legislators and the National Governors Association provide useful information to state legislators through conferences, forums, webinars, and other events on a broad number of issues, including education. Education issues, too, are often part of a candidate’s campaign strategy; but, here again, the use of research may help buttress existing policymakers’ positions or be used to counter an opponent.

Reaching policymakers can be difficult for researchers. The publication, Communicating Research for Evidence-Based Policymaking: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Socio-Economic Sciences and Humanities (Directorate, 2010) suggests “ten steps towards an effective dissemination strategy” specific to policymakers. They are:

1. Form a communication and dissemination team that identifies potential beneficiaries (audiences) and anticipates their questions
2. Create a promotional flyer
3. Produce a detailed identity brochure
4. Develop an attractive project website
5. Seek out dialogue with stakeholders
6. Engage the media
7. Write policy briefs
8. Arrange briefing sessions and dialogue panels
9. Organize a final conference
10. Produce a final publishable summary report

While we don’t disagree with this strategy, we suspect that most researchers don’t have the resources to do all of the above. Nor are policymakers likely to have the time to attend education conferences or even briefings and dialogue panels. Consequently, we favor a more
manageable approach recommended by Ronald Wimberley & Libby Morris in their article *Communicating Research to Policymakers* (2007). This article is based on Ron Wimberley’s personal experiences working as a congressional staffer while on leave from his university position.⁴

1.) “Get to know the legislative staffers.” They are the information gatherers for the policymakers and are far more approachable than the policymakers themselves.
2.) “Issues first, then research.” Clearly state the problem, then follow with the research. Hitting a policymaker with a research report or even a summary of your findings will likely lead to the glazed-eye effect. Succinctly identify the issues, provide specific examples, and then follow with research supporting what needs to be done to fix the problem.
3.) “Colorful, visual.” You need something that grabs attention and supports your message. Wimberly describes a “slick poster-sized map” that they produced which colorfully and visually showed the percentage of African Americans living in Southern Black Belt cities in 1996. That poster, even many years later, hangs in at least one art gallery and many government and faculty offices. They also produced a polished publication that was very easy to read and very short. It was used subsequently in a number of fundraising efforts supporting their call to action.

To support Wimberley’s recommendations, one of this paper’s authors was recently contacted by a legislative staffer on behalf of a Utah congressman.⁵ I was the second author of a colorful policy brief written in easy to understand English, simply called, *Making Afterschools Better* (Huang & Dietel, 2011). The Utah staffer noticed the publication on our web site while looking for research indicating that afterschool programs often have positive outcomes for students. The short policy brief produced the phone call (motivation), and a subsequent connection (action) to the more detailed research reports behind the policy brief. *Issues first, then*

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⁴ The italicized words are from Ronald Wimberley, the non-italicized words are a summary from his article combined with our own experiences.
⁵ The “I” in this case is Ron Dietel.
research.

Our final recommendation when targeting policy makers is to write all materials without bias. Write clearly and objectively. While that sounds obvious, it’s surprisingly easy to slip into the realm of opinion.

Audience: “All”
Sometimes your audience is not well defined. The authors have occasionally been asked to reach what we call the “All” audience—the conglomerated and nebulous everyone, with a broad range of concerns. The following are some important practices for this amorphous group:

1) Write simply
To reach the All audience, indeed to reach any audience, we cannot overemphasize the importance of transforming research into easy-to-understand language that connects to real concerns. The most recurrent theme in nearly every article written about effective research communications is the importance of clear and concise writing. Even the best research publication guides emphasize this factor including the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association which says, “Say only what needs to be said. The author who is frugal with words not only writes a more readable manuscript but also increases the chances that the manuscript will be accepted for publication.” (2001, page 34).

If you absolutely must write in long sentences and complex language, we encourage you to do so only in a full report. If you want broader readership, write an executive summary, policy brief, or even a one or two page flyer in simple language to reach all audiences. As non-researchers immersed in the field of research, we have yet to read an education publication and tell ourselves, “the author really should have used longer sentences, more complex words, and tables with more cells to help us understand their work.”
2) Use visual appeal

Visual quality is equally important. Our best advice is white space. Don’t try to cram the contents of a full report into a policy brief or the contents of a policy brief into a flyer. Edit, edit, edit. The purpose of a shorter piece is to draw attention and interest, just as it did in the policymaker example previously mentioned. Graphic designers are indispensable in making your publication or product look better for any audience. (See Appendix C for writing recommendations.)

3) Apply these rules in all mediums

Nearly all of our recommendations apply equally to other means of communications, especially presentations. For PowerPoint presentations, we encourage a simple slide design combined with a 666 rule:

- 6 bullets, maximum, on a slide
- 6 words per bullet
- 6 point sources on a graphic

Other PowerPoint Rules

- Font size should be at least 18 (that’s 6x3 or 6+6+6) (Dietel, 2012).
- Have others critique your presentation; even your family members are likely to provide usable feedback.
- Practice your full presentation at least three times in front of a mirror before giving it, using your laptop or other device to simulate your actual presentation as much as possible.
- If feasible, do a dry run in the room where you will do your actual presentation as close to your actual presentation time as possible.

(See Appendix D for a list of presentation tips.)
**Question 2: New Communications Strategies**

*What new strategies show reasonable probability of overcoming traditional barriers of effective research dissemination and action?*

With the explosion of social media in the last decade or so, it seems as if, every day, there's a new app-du-jour. To Tweet or not to Tweet? Do you need a Facebook page? Are you LinkedIn? Should you show Pinterest? Should you join in the Yelping? Ignite something? Go plus with your googling (yes, Google has gone the way of Kleenex and Xerox to become a generic and official verb (Anderson, 2006)).

On one level, a communicator can use any tool—be it Morse code or a hologram—and have an impact as long as foundational strategies of good communication are observed. These are the practices of newsworthiness, audience relevance, engaging content, etc., as described above. At the same time, many modern tools amplify your impact in ways that older methods simply can’t: Why mail a report, when you can tweet it?

In this section we’ll touch on some of the social media tools that can be reliably used to get the word out to a wide range of audiences and, once the word is out, to see if anyone's listening. Because of the fluidity and incredible innovations taking place in the ether, we expect 10 new social media tools to be invented and 10 will disappear between the time we started typing this sentence and the time we finished it. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list. Rather, this is a run-down of a few of the most effective and enduring social media tools that successful communicators use.

**Website**

This is where your research in all its forms should live—the mother ship to which all social media will point. This is also a good place for your credentials and contact information to live. Whether you Tweet, post to Facebook or Pinterest, upload to YouTube, or send out an E-blast,
you need a home base to point people back to. If you are one of the few still without a web page, here are some options:

1) Faculty page
Most colleges and universities provide you with web space to create your own page. In some cases, you can even get tech support to help you build out the page. Talk to your department chair, webmaster, or administrative assistant. If you're also affiliated with a center, it's likely they can give you some real estate on their site.

2) Free web pages
For those who don't have a university affiliation, or have a department that just doesn't offer that service, there is a plethora of ways to create your own web page. Among them, Google (http://sites.google.com) and WordPress (http://wordpress.com/). Both are free, longstanding, and have attractive templates to use (you can see the authors' WordPress site at https://communicateresearch.wordpress.com/2012/12/10/316/). You have to put up with your space being commercialized. But, as Milton Freeman and many before him have said, "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch."

3) Facebook
Facebook is the mother ship among mother ships. If Facebook was a country, it would be the third largest country in the world, with somewhere in the neighborhood of 1 billion citizens (Williams, 2012). As one Atlantic article put it, "In just eight years, Facebook has gained a population size that took humans hundreds of thousands of years to achieve." (Rosen, 2012).

Depending on demographics, the average Facebook user has 229 friends (Pew Internet, 2012). When you post to Facebook, your “friends” and all their “friends” will view your post. And, if anyone else posts, your original voice is amplified by their average 229 friends. We'll
address analytics more in a moment, but take note that Facebook has a simple, but helpful, analytics function that gives feedback on user engagement.

This ancient (in 21st century time) graphic shows Facebook's popularity in 2010. Since this was created, the Facebook population has doubled.

**Figure 2: World Populations and the Facebook “Nation”**

![Diagram showing world populations and Facebook usage]


**Twitter**

To Tweet or not to Tweet? Our experience shows that Tweeting is a dicey pursuit and an unprofitable time sink, with two exceptions: If you are tweeting with celebrity-level status it can be worth the time, since celebrities naturally draw audiences. The proof comes in looking at the top education tweeters of 2012 (Petrilli, 2012): Arne Duncan (81,343 followers), Michelle Rhee (49,229 followers), Diane Ravitch (48,459 followers), and Randi Weingarten (21,327 followers).

Still, the followings of these Twitter education rock stars pales in comparison to the current top five tweeters (as of March, 2013). They are: Justin Bieber (37.2 million followers), Lady Gaga (35.9 million followers), Katy Perry (34.7 million followers), Barack Obama (29.5 million followers), and Rihanna (29.1 million followers). (Twittercounter.com, 2013.)
But don't think you shouldn't tweet because you're not the Mick Jagger of assessment development or teacher evaluation. Included in Petrilli’s list with respectable followings are people who have made an impact not by being on the frontlines first, but by being steadfast and consistent in their messaging. Among them, Patrick Riccards, Sam Chaltain, Anthony Cody, and Mike Klonsky. (See "Strategies: Social Media Staying Power" section below for tips on effective tweeting.)

**Multimedia: YouTube, iTunes, and beyond**

Information is ballooning and our attention bandwidth is diminishing. Multimedia is the perfect answer. The critical tenets of modern multimedia: relevant, entertaining, memorable, visual, and, most importantly, short.

These tenets go against some academic instincts. But web viewers are generally not looking for a long sit-down to focus on a single video (there are exceptions, of course, and this is where webinars come in). Guide your product with a binary mindset: One idea, one or two supporting points, one or two illustrating examples, one conclusion and/or one call to action. At the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, we've produced dozens of videos and the ones that invariably get the most hits are those that are short and address one concern, e.g., the Common Core; or, if longer, stick to one topic, e.g., modeling our education system after successful systems abroad.

**Listservs**

Listservs are a variation on other social media outlets, with a key difference: Rather than a passive road-side stand along the internet highway that passersby can visit by choice, a listserv goes off-road, up driveways, and into the homes of audiences. Listservs are not spam: End users opt in. This is a powerful tool for organizations, centers, and very active individuals as you can alert your willing audience to new research and related events as they happen.
In most cases, audiences are developed through a web site that offers a link to join a mailing list (another argument for having a web site). These services facilitate two essential processes of audience outreach:

- Mail list management
- Announcement formatting

Mail list management: As users opt in to the listserv or you add users, they are usually added to a database that lives on the hosting company's web site. Most services offer fairly advanced ways to organize and manage these databases. Most services also charge according to the number of names in your database, with lower-end quantities being free.

Announcement formatting: Most services offer templates so that you can easily design attractive newsletters and announcements to send out. Going back to an earlier theme, "colorful visual" is important. An attractive email announcement doesn't just look pretty, it draws people in, and it conveys a level of professionalism that can't be achieved with plain text or poorly designed announcements.

**Listserv options**

There are many listservs in the sea, with these four being the most popular:

1. MailChimp
2. Constant Contact
3. Vertical Response
4. iContact

Like Mac versus PC, the choice on which to use can have a lot to do with personal preferences. MailChimp and Constant Contact have virtually the same functionality, with slightly different price points, but if you like a PC interface, Constant Contact may be more your speed. Mac users, especially those with a goofy sense of humor, will likely feel more at home with
MailChimp. Vertical Response is a power users' choice, a listserv on steroids. And iContact is the new kid on the block. For a quick overview of MailChimp and Constant Contact (both used long term by the authors), please see our recent PowerPoint:

Last tip: Announcements sent Mondays and Fridays tend to get the fewest reads, logically enough. Send your announcements mid-week and mid-day. Most listserv services will allow dissemination by time zone if you set your mailings up enough in advance.

Analytics
Tapping the force of the social media strata can be a great idea—as long as you track your work and see what kind of impact you make. In this at-your-fingertips, exhibitionist era we live in, it's incredibly easy to not only put your research out there in many milieu, but to see who cares. You can quickly and easily get feedback in the virtual world: Which report or brief got the most downloads? When you posted that press release, how many people clicked the links? Did anyone care about that op-ed you wrote for the Chicago Tribune? Who re-tweeted your tweet? Who shared your Facebook post?

These days, we can track so many things so easily and—at least in the context of knowing if people care about your news—this is a helpful thing.

Top analytics tracking tools include:

1) Google Analytics
A simple bit of code added to your web pages will give you an incredible amount of knowledge. How many people downloaded that last report? What keywords were used to find it? What day did it get the most hits? http://www.google.com/analytics/
2) Listserv
Any listserv worth its salt also offers reports on how many clicks, shares, and downloads your announcements get. You also get alerts when people subscribe or unsubscribe (very colorfully, from MailChimp). This information can be vital for informing strategy for future sends.

3) Facebook
If you create a page as an organization rather than an individual, a fringe benefit is the weekly analytics report you get, as well as the on-the-spot reports about how many people saw your news feed.

4) Twitter
A plethora of tracking programs exist to see who has followed you, re-tweeted you, made comments about you, made comments relevant to you. Among them, TweetDeck, Hoot Suite, Tweetreach, Hashtracking.com, Qtwitter (to learn when you get unfollowed by someone), Tweetstats, Google. The list is endless and, with much else in the stratosphere, will change before the sun sets one more time.

Social media strategies
A few basic tenets hold true in all communication outreach, whether it's an old school press release or a new school Tweet. To reiterate:

1. Know your audience: Be interesting. This means sharing what’s relevant to them, not you.
2. Be consistent and constant: Tweet or Pinterest or post to Facebook, etc., regularly, so people remember and rely on you.
3. Be interactive and responsive: Try asking questions for deeper engagement. And, if you do, listen and respond. Reply to or re-tweet comments mentioning you.
4. Track. And adjust according to what your tracking tells you.
Recommendations

This paper has covered a diverse number of ways to overcome barriers to research use, focusing on the elements of awareness and motivation in our Research Use Model (Figure 1). We conclude with some additional recommendations that we believe could lead to improvements in all seven components of the model.

1) Communications training for researchers
As mentioned in our literature review, only a handful of universities offer courses in effective communications despite the hundreds of education researchers they graduate each year. We believe this needs to change. Every graduate school of education should include a required communications course to improve researchers' communications skills before they enter the field. These courses should emphasize communicating research in plain language for non-research audiences, and also focus on improving presentation skills, communications with the media, and use of social media. On-the-job training just isn’t sufficient. If you need evidence to support this recommendation, attend any education research conference, where we assert you will find overly busy and incomprehensible PowerPoint presentations, delivered by researchers who haven’t practiced their speeches before giving them, and backed by deeply obtuse and esoteric reporting of research. Even the best thinking can be lost because of basic and easily addressed problems: The speaker who shouts, "Can you hear me without a mike?" to a large room and when she hears in the affirmative, chucks the mike and drops her volume to sotto voce for the rest of the presentation. Or the infamous LCD projector that worked just fine at home but simply will not connect with the computer now that it’s show time.

2) Create a center dedicated to improving research use
We believe that the field is far overdue for a long-term, single-mission research and development center, or similar organization, dedicated to increasing research use as well as improving communication methods. Ideally this would be a five-year center with a specific
mission to address a full range of research-use issues, ranging from audience development to full-scale school implementation, evaluation, and feedback. The *What Works Clearinghouse* is a start, but is not enough because it largely reviews research rather than moving it into implementation or measuring impact; nor does it study the communication of research to difference audiences. This center should have a core mission of taking research from theory to practice.

3) **Incorporate communications planning into all research grants**
All federal education grants should contain a stronger dissemination component than currently exists. At minimum, we believe that federal education R&D grants should have a strong dissemination component. In cases of large research centers, a communications director should be mandatory. If research use and dissemination are not integrated into research projects in the early stages of planning, they too easily fall by the wayside, back to the basics of journal publications and occasional conference presentations, whose audiences are too often other researchers.

4) **Enlist professional organizations to foster professional development for communication and dissemination**
Professional associations such as AERA and NCME have important roles to play as well. While both AERA and NCME have been instrumental in supporting research use communications in the past, including professional development courses that both authors are involved in, we would like to see a stronger effort, especially in pushing policy for the federal government or a foundation to fund a dissemination research center. Another possibility would be comprehensive research use fellowships or more communications training for education researchers. AERA has offered a number of media related training opportunities for researchers at its annual meetings, but we would like to see broader and deeper communications training that included other audiences and additional media especially social media. Another possible professional association role is to sponsor and host annual communicators or research use
meetings similar to the annual Knowledge Alliance institute for communicators offered to member institutions.

Ultimately, what’s the point of research if it doesn’t get into the hands of people who will actually do something with it? We know — and have known for years — what needs to be done to improve education in American for all children. We have talked amongst ourselves and found that, when we look at the data, we generally agree. Now it's time to reach out to a broader community — parents, practitioners, administrators, policymakers, reporters — and make what we know actionable. More than 50 million students in K-12 education justify our best efforts.
References


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Appendix A
Newsworthy or Not?

- Is your knowledge useful?
- Can your message connect to the annual news cycle (back to school, release of test results, graduation)?
- Is something new revealed by your research?
- Does it inform an education debate or breaking news?
- Can it be localized?
- Does it have emotional appeal? A human interest angle?

News Hooks

- Controversy: Propose solutions that defy current policy and practice
- Consumer news: “News you can use.” Produce a resource that helps parents, teachers, or legislators navigate an education policy, evaluate school practices, compare options, etc.
- Human interest: Compelling stories that demonstrate the problem you're addressing or the solutions you've found.
- Trends: You can get attention by documenting trends in policy, practice. Use at least three examples (two is not a trend).
- News Cycle: Take advantage of the annual news cycle to piggyback your story on. Reporters are always looking for fresh takes on annual stories.
- News: Actual new news is always appealing. Are you uncovering something no one has researched before? That in and of itself makes your research relevant.
- Questions: In this increasingly interactive world, a powerful form of communication is conversation. Talk to your audience and ask provocative questions.
Appendix B

Tips for Working with the Media

The following are some suggestions for effectively working with the media. These are not rules, but guidelines.

1. Make a reporter’s call or email a high priority. A reporter working on **deadline** has a story that must be turned in to the editor by the end of the day. Unless you are running flat out and truly can’t handle a 10-15 minute phone call, push other work aside.

2. At the beginning of any interview, ask for a **brief** background about the story. Is the story based on a recently released report or an incident? Who have they talked with so far? Getting background information serves two purposes: 1) provides context to any comment that you might make and 2) gives you a moment to ask yourself: Is this in my field of expertise? Do I know enough to provide useful input? What might I say that would be helpful?

3. Make sure that you fully understand any questions being asked. Don’t hesitate to ask for clarification and more background, although avoid becoming the interviewer yourself. If a reporter wants you to comment on a report that you haven’t read, ask for time to read it. You can find most reports on the Internet.

4. Be brief. As a researcher, you generally ask research questions, design instruments, collect data, analyze data, and draw conclusions from the results. Usually a reporter is interested in the results. Keep your answers simple and to the point.

5. Respond as the expert you are, but defer to others who are better qualified when you reach into areas beyond your expertise. Realize however, that a reporter working on
deadline may be unable to reach a more qualified expert. You may be the most qualified person in their space of time.

6. Support your responses with completed research studies whenever possible, ideally your own. Provide names of other experts to contact or other studies relevant to the current work.

7. Offer the reporter fact sheets and other supporting information. Fax or overnight background material. If sending a full report, either flag or highlight the most important pages or paragraphs. Reporters seldom have time to read a full report.

8. Most educational research does not have a single clear-cut answer. If there are limits to a study, for example, inform the reporter of those limits. Provide balance. Be honest.

9. Be professional. I suggest that you avoid criticizing other organizations or individuals. It can come back to haunt you or the organization that you represent. Even if we say “my opinion only,” our organization’s name will be included in our attribution.

10. Never leave reporters hanging. If you feel uncomfortable talking to the press, fine, but call them back and provide names of others whose opinions and expertise you value. If you don’t want to call a reporter back, tell your communications office and ask them to reply for you.

11. Don’t ask to review a reporter’s article before it goes to print. They don’t have the time and won’t do it. But feel free to ask when the article will appear and let your communications office know about it.

12. If you know you are going to be interviewed, prepare in advance. Write out your answers to questions that you think a reporter might ask you. This helps to organize
your thoughts and responses. It also gives you an opportunity to review any facts or figures you may be using. Stay up with news in your field, not just research.

13. Everything you say is “on the record,” and the reporter considers that you are on the record unless you both agree otherwise. There should virtually never be a situation where you need to speak to a reporter “off the record.”

14. Not every interview with a reporter will result in a quote. Newspapers have tight space requirements and you shouldn’t feel slighted when you are not quoted in the story. There will likely be another opportunity. You are building a relationship.

15. What should you do if you are misquoted? That’s a difficult question. If your words have been rephrased, but the content is accurate, then I don’t advise doing anything. A reporter may actually improve our spoken words. If it is a major misquote, that is, the quote is perhaps the opposite of what you said, then you should feel free to contact the reporter. You might ask for a correction, although corrections are oftentimes lumped together and may not catch many readers attention. If a reporter continually gets information wrong, then a phone call to the editor is an appropriate option.

16) Your goal is to build a relationship with reporters. Remember to say thanks and encourage the reporter to call you back on future stories.

**Getting your message out**

The following are some suggestions for reaching out to the media to share your own research.

1) Build a relationship with your media or communications office right now. Let them know who you are and your areas of expertise. Most universities have media contact lists, so ask to be added to that list.
2) If you have a specific research study or report that will be coming out, contact your communications office well ahead of time. Let them know about your findings and the significance that your research will have for the public. The earlier you let your communications office know about a report, say two or three months before its release date, the more likely your message will reach a broad audience.

3) Consider many ways to share your research. Certainly a printed news release targeting newspapers across the country should be part of your communications strategy. Also consider outreach via:

- Radio and television stations,
- Education magazines (non-journals),
- Well-known bloggers,
- A Wikipedia entry if appropriate,
- Op-eds,
- Writing a blog yourself
- Hosting or being part of an education seminar or conference

4) Suggest a presentation topic to the Education Writer’s Association or the Hechinger Institute. For example, in the early fall of each year, EWA begins working on possible topics and speakers for their spring annual meeting. That’s a good time to pitch a story to them. They also do regional seminars during the year. Check out what they are doing at www.ewa.org/. The Hechinger Institute web site is at hechinger.tc.columbia.edu/. Or put together your own local education research seminar for reporters in your state or regional area.

5) Consider smaller, lesser-known media outlets or markets. Sure, you might want to be on Oprah or have a quote in USA Today, but you are competing against more people and
usually very well known names. Your chances of publication are higher in a regional or local publication.

6) What do you do if you don’t have a communications office, or if they don’t have enough staff to help? First, get as much as you can from whoever is available to help. You may only need a media contact list and assistance with writing a standard university news release. Don’t be afraid to ask and to push. Second, if that doesn’t work, or you truly have no media assistance, the Internet provides you the opportunity to promote your own work at little or no cost. You or an administrative assistant can create your own media contact list by searching the Internet and finding reporters who write about education. Try writing your own blog or contact blogging colleagues who may be happy to spread word of your good work.

7) Be aware of any university or organizational guidelines about contacting the media. Many universities, for example, have a specific news release format that they ask you to follow. It’s also good to keep your dean and communications or media relations officer in the loop if you are doing media relations work on your own.

8) As with all public communications, a word of thanks to those who help will contribute to a long-term positive relationship.
Appendix C
Top Ten Tips for Improved Writing

1) How do you find time to write given all your other responsibilities? Answer, learn to say no. Every day there are a hundred distractions that prevent you from getting your work done, including writing. Just sending and reading e-mail, for example, can put you into a virtual all-day conference. Finding time to write requires your commitment to establish a sacred writing time. Say “no” to making too many presentations, serving on too many committees, or anything that distracts you from the time you need to write.

2) Shorten your sentences. There is no better way to more effectively communicate in print to any audience than to shorten a long sentence. Sentences exceeding 25 words are too long. Read newspapers and magazines for examples of short concise writing.

3) Ditto the above for paragraphs. Five lines per paragraph is usually a maximum.

4) Learn from others who write in easy to understand language. Reports from the National Center for Education Statistics are often good examples of how technical language and concepts can be written for any audience. NCES graphs and tables are usually very successful in conveying complex details in an easy to understand format.

5) Volunteer as a journal reviewer. Reading and critiquing writing by others will help you become a better writer yourself.

6) Avoid “educationese” language. For example, although the word “practice” in education circles is usually synonymous with the word “teaching,” anyone outside of education will likely not understand the term. In Dictionary.com, there are no fewer than 17 definitions of the word “practice,” but not a single mention of the word “teaching.” If you mean teaching, write teaching. If you get into the habit of using a lot of academic words, like, practice, instantiate or cognition, it will be more difficult to change that style when you decide to write for a non-academic audience.
7) Have a **non-researcher read your paper** or article. If they can’t understand it, then revise it.

8) **Use the active voice**, not the passive voice. Here is an example of the passive voice. *The study was conducted by the research team.* Compare this to the active voice; *the research team conducted the study.* The active voice uses fewer words, correctly places the subject before the verb, and is easier to understand.

9) **Short titles** not only communicate more effectively, but also usually reach a broader audience. Movie titles and most book titles are fairly short. *E.T., Star Wars, Braveheart,* and *Mission Impossible* are just a few short movie title examples. Probably the most referenced publication in education research is *A Nation At Risk*, just four words in its title. A broad title, like *New Research Findings in Performance Assessment*, is likely to find a large audience. A longer title, like *Psychometric Properties of Empirical Studies in Alternate Response Modes for Performance Assessment Systems*, will most likely have a very narrow audience. If you want to reach a lot of people, use a shorter title.

10) **Write clearly.** The fastest road to rejection is lack of clarity. I am amazed at how many research reports I read where I have to hunt or guess at the research questions. If you are writing a research paper or journal article, follow the basic research format and closely read the publication requirements.

AERA has an excellent on-line publication called *Publishing Educational Research: Guidelines and Tips.*
Appendix D

Ten Tips for Better Presentations

Nearly all of us make formal presentations at some time in our careers, if not on a regular basis. If your speaking skills could use some improvement, here are ten tips that can help.

1) **Practice.** Being an expert in your field doesn’t automatically make you an expert presenter. Practice your complete presentation at least 3-4 times before you step onto any stage. Practice improves every aspect of your presentation, from timing and remembering important facts, to increasing your confidence.

2) **Cut content.** When we try to cover too much content or use too many visuals, we speed up our pace to an uncomfortable level. Reduce both content and visuals so that you focus only on the most important points. Share details in a paper or report.

3) **The world is your audience.** Regardless of how hard we try, it is nearly impossible to target a presentation to a specific group. We seldom really know who will actually attend. To reach the broadest possible audience, simplify your content so that anyone can understand it. Again, put the technical stuff into a paper or report.

4) **Get attention early and keep it.** There are many ways to get and keep attention. In the time that it takes you to read this article, 10 students will drop out of school. Strong statistics, relevant anecdotes, asking questions, and even humor, can both draw audience attention and help you keep it. Try different methods and find out what works effectively for you.

5) **Steal from good speakers.** It isn’t just what good speakers say, but how they say it. Excellent speakers such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, for example, paused at key moments in their speeches and varied their inflection. Study good speakers and borrow profusely. Don’t worry, most good speakers borrow profusely themselves.

6) **Learn from mistakes, yours and others.** As you study other good speakers and deliver presentations, write down what doesn’t work in addition to what does. Some problems
are obvious, such as a speaker at one conference who apologized to the audience because he left all of his speaking materials at home. Small things are important too, such as too many ums and ahs. Writing mistakes down, yours and others, will help you avoid them in the future.

7) **Follow the 666 rule for PowerPoints or other presentation visuals.** One of the quickest ways to lose an audience is to overwhelm them with too much information, often a result of copying text or a table “as-is” from a paper or other source and pasting it into a PowerPoint. Keep your visuals simple using a maximum of 6 bullets per slide, six or fewer words per bullet, and no more than 6 information points on a graphic. To be legible from even a moderate distance your minimal font size should be 18 points, easily remembered by adding 6+6+6, or multiplying 6x3.

Simplify your presentation visuals. Using just four information points, this graphic quickly and clearly communicates that the basic achievement level was the same in 2009 as it was in 1992.

8) **Location, location, location.** Arrive at your presentation site a minimum of one hour before your session begins. That will allow you to study the room, set up or check audiovisual equipment, and coordinate your presentation with fellow presenters. If the
room is vacant before your presentation, or even the day before your presentation, practice to an empty audience. You will feel more comfortable and confident during your final presentation.

9) **Audiovisual.** Notice how the word *audio* precedes the word *visual*. If your audience can’t hear you, then even the most stunning visuals are fairly worthless. Ask for and use a microphone if your group is any larger than a classroom. Speak loudly, but don’t shout at the audience.

10) **Avoid going last on a panel or late in an agenda.** Far too often, the last person’s time gets cut short because of poor time-keeping, presenters who speak over his or her time limit, audiovisual problems (see Tip 9), or a school board that is running far behind schedule.