

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 18 Number 15

April 7, 2017

Theatre as a Vehicle for Mobilizing Knowledge in Education

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Citation: Segedin, L. (2017). Theatre as a vehicle for mobilizing knowledge in education. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 18(15). Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v18n15/>.

Abstract

In the field of education, there has been an increased emphasis on evidence-based practice. Yet, traditional dissemination methods continue to be used. Using more creative and innovative strategies to disseminate research are needed. Theatre is one such method. Stemming from the research on knowledge mobilization and theatre as a method for social change, this study aimed to understand educator's perceptions and attitudes about using theatre to disseminate research. The study's method included a Likert-scale survey with the option to add open-ended responses. Responses from the 110 educators who viewed the research-based play indicated that the use of theatre has the ability to increase the impact of research use on practitioners in education.

Introduction

Using evidence in practice has expanded greatly in the past 10 years. Its rise can be attributed to numerous factors, including the developments in information technology, the growth in size and availability of the research community, increased international competitiveness, and increased government accountability sought by a well-educated and well-informed public (Davies, Nutley & Walter, 2008). In the field of education though, there still is limited use of evidence-based practice (Cooper & Levin, 2010). Furthermore, despite the wide array of dissemination strategies available to convey research, traditional methods, such as workshops, continue to be used. Using more creative and innovative communication strategies to disseminate research is needed to motivate stakeholders to take action. One such strategy may be theatre. While using theatre for the purpose of mobilizing knowledge has rarely been used and is well outside the mainstream thinking (Levin, 2008), it may be a promising way to disseminate research in education.

The Study

This study grew out of my work as a researcher and as an educator. After years of attending ineffective workshops and presentations, I wondered if there was a more effective way to mobilize research knowledge. Theatre struck me as a possibility with its ability to convey a message on both an intellectual and emotional level. Stemming from the research on knowledge mobilization and theatre for social change, which serves as this study's conceptual framework, this study aimed to understand educator's perceptions and attitudes about using theatre to disseminate research.

The Relationship between Research and Theatre

Knowledge mobilization (KM) is the transfer and translation of knowledge between research and practice. There are a wide range of initiatives used to improve research use, but strategies vary and involve different levels of engagement. In education, using research to inform practice is still limited in its use. Single studies and cross-sector reviews (Cooper & Levin, 2010; Cordingley, 2008; Hemsley-Brown, 2004) have found that research findings are considered a relatively less important source of information in influencing educators' knowledge about education issues compared to personal experiences. Educators frequently claim that their personal experience is more meaningful than empirical research due to the uniqueness of each educational setting. Practitioners also do not typically have an understanding of empirical-based research because many do not have the access, time, or ability to utilize current research. Few practitioners read original studies and instead rely on professional learning events, professional associations, the workplace, or the media to gain an understanding of research that is often abstract, challenging, and not written in plain language (Cooper, Levin & Campbell, 2009). Personal experience takes precedence because it is a lived

reality, and because researchers typically do not mobilize or disseminate research findings in a creative way that is accessible or useful to practitioners. Various research studies (Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Walter, Nutley & Davis, 2009) found that collaborative approaches involving researchers and practitioners is key to greater research use in the public sector. Each audience has different information needs and communication styles, and research must be appropriately tailored (Cordingley, 2008; Mittin, Adair, McKenzie, Patten & Perry, 2007). While no study clearly articulates what works best in each context, we do know that simply telling people about evidence and urging them to change their practice is often ineffective (Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2008). Practitioners need to connect intellectually, practically and emotionally to the research that is being conveyed in order to motivate them to change and improve (Cordingley, 2008). Research must also be relevant, conveyed through simple language, and built on what practitioners know, can do, and believe already (Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2006). While researchers are often suspicious of prescriptions or “tips” for teachers, teachers need concrete ideas that can be easily implemented (Cordingley, 2008). Offering a variety of strategies where there is empirical evidence and can be implemented the next day is often most helpful. Twenty-years of research has shown us that traditional ways of disseminating research results, such as academic journal publications, conference presentations and workshops, are often ineffective (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Fullan 2007). Instead, collaborative, interactive approaches that presents research in a format that is accessible and inspiring has been found to be most promising in motivating people into action (Cordingley, 2008; Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Oschocka & Janzen, 2011). Theatre may be one such creative approach.

Theatre has had many purposes in human culture, including entertaining, enlightening and informing an audience. Some forms of theatre focus purely on the aesthetic and serve no other purpose than to entertain an audience through a story or event. In other cases, theatre has served as a catalyst for social change. Theatre was a form of social commentary in Shakespearean theatre, the political theatre of Brecht in Germany during the 1930s, and in modern society, addressing issues such as labour, women or civil rights, poverty, homelessness, AIDS, among others (Sloman, 2011). Pro-social and political theatre seek to directly challenge the causes and class interests which underpin injustices. It also reflects social change evolving around and within us, and aims to help audiences to see that the world as knowable, malleable, and demands critical thinking (Neelands, 2007).

Since the 1980s theatre has also been employed as a method and methodology for conducting and disseminating research (White & Belliveau, 2010). Research-based theatre has encompassed many different forms, including verbatim theatre, performed ethnography, documentary theatre and ethnotheatre/drama (Beck, Belliveau, Lee & Wager, 2011). Ethnodrama, according to Johnny Saldaña (2010), adapts qualitative educational research into scripted and performed work for the stage. The script is created from selections from

interviews, field notes, journal entries, print/media artifacts or the playwright's own autoethnographic reflections. Some ethnodramas prioritize faithfulness to source data, while others prioritize fully realized artistic theatrical productions. If more artistic faithfulness is desired, ethnodramatists can combine artistic techniques to enhance and lengthen storylines, and to create more emotion-evoking monologue and dialogue, if that is desired. While academic or professional audiences may be looking less for fully realized artistry and more for transparency of analysis and to be informed and instructed in some way, a balance and blend between artistry and research should occur with no fixed boundaries (Beck et al, 2011). If done well, ethnodrama has the potential to increase awareness and deepen understanding that can translate into future applications, like classroom practice and educational policy making (Saldaña, 2010). This may be because theatre elicits understandings that would be otherwise inaccessible, and through these understandings, engages the audience in making meaning and constructing knowledge. Theatre also has the added capability to pull on heart strings and bring emotion into an issue that may appear very clinical or abstract in thought. With the emotional capability of a theatrical production, theatre can be an art form, such as the one Greene (1995) speaks of, that "reaches beyond what is established and leads those who are willing to risk transformations to the shaping of social vision" (p. 30).

While there are many positive factors for creating a research-based theatrical production, there are reasons for its under-representation. First, there are difficulties encountered by non-artists borrowing forms from art to represent research findings. Theatre is character driven, plot focused, and story centered. Theatre is multi-layered and textured. It is both message and delivery. Using theatre to mobilize knowledge may run the risk of limitation, especially if one writes to serve a message and does not go deep enough to tell a story or evoke a feeling that has the power to create change. Neglecting to collaborate closely with performance artists can be a serious oversight, especially as researchers may not know how much they don't know about theatre (Belliveau & Lea, 2011; Clover & Craig, 2009; Fenwick, 2008). Another limitation to research-based theatre is that we currently do not know much about its long-term impact. There are few, if any, systemic studies evaluating the efficacy of research-based theatre in education (Belliveau & Lea, 2011). However, from the research on educational change and knowledge mobilization (Fullan 2007; Honig 2006), we do know that all messages need to be revisited and reinforced, and without frequent and sustained messaging, there is limited capacity of making lasting change.

Methodology

This study began with the creation of a research-based play. The material was based on the researcher's autoethnographic examination of her career and the material that came from her own educational stories and experiences. Like many ethnodramas, this 45 minute play focused on high school students in conflict with school and themselves, and a novice teacher who

struggles with instructional, management and personal dilemmas in the classroom. However, unlike many ethnodramas, both teacher and students were key players on stage, interacting with each other in equal measure. The play also included other characters and scenes found in many high schools, but not typically represented in ethnodramas: the disgruntled, burned out teachers who are just tired, an administrator who wants to maintain the status quo, staffroom complaining that centers around the ongoing changes to governmental policy in relation to disengaged students, and some enthusiastic teachers (although often silent in staff discussions) who aim to help students, in effective and sometimes ineffective ways. While adding more than two characters adds complexity to dialogue in theatrical productions, in this case it was felt necessary. Voices of administration, marginalized youth, the novice, and the experienced teachers were all felt to be needed to portray a typical North American high school that educator audiences could relate to.

Embedded in the plot-line were also empirically-based research concepts found in single studies and meta-analyses on how to engage disengaged youth (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007; Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Rumberger, 1995; Segedin, 2012). Concepts the play highlighted, included:

1. Creating a positive classroom environment with high expectations.
2. Not allocating zeros to incomplete assignments, but rather providing students with needed support and encouragement necessary to be successful.
3. Expanding programming that reflects individual student interests and is career focused.
4. Fostering and promoting relationships between the school and the larger community.
5. You can't do it alone; educators need to work together to help support students in-risk of not graduating from high school.

Along with these key ideas, between two to five strategies were offered per concept to aid in its implementation. Strategies included having clear transparent goals for each lesson taught, offering a mentoring program that pairs at-risk students with a caring adult, good news phone calls or postcards sent home, providing mandatory afterschool/lunch meetings for students who have not completed their assignments, allowing students to resubmit assignments to achieve a better grade, and encouraging cooperative education and other career-oriented programs, to name a few. These strategies were not meant to be new or revolutionary, but rather were chosen because they are research-driven, relatively easy to implement, and they were building on the work already promoted by the school district. The goal of this play was to deepen current goals of the district, not necessarily to create new ones.

To add another layer to the play, a drama class of student actors was given the opportunity to work on the script. The drama teacher and his students added depth to the student characters and their voice in the play. Many of the students in the drama class have struggled in school. Through the script they articulated their struggles, fears, and reasons for their poor academic performance. It also allowed the students to articulate how much they want to be heard, and for someone to care about them personally and academically at school, even though they don't appear to care. These were messages that both the students and the researcher felt important to be heard by an audience of educators.

Once a final script was complete, the drama class rehearsed the play for a few weeks, often in collaboration with the researcher who herself has an arts background. Then the play was presented to an audience of 110 educators. These educators were members of the 15 secondary school's student success teams in the district. Student success teams consist of a high school administrator, guidance counsellors, learning support teachers, cooperative education teachers, child and youth workers, and student success teachers¹. Aside from cooperative education teachers, the members of the student success teams have interviewed and been hired specifically for these positions, which aim to help students in school both academically and socially. The play was presented at one of the four annual professional learning days that student success teams attend to gain an understanding of current educational trends/issues and to reinforce the school district's goals for student success. In this session though, research and implementation strategies were no longer an abstract idea. Through theatre, they were now an action that could be seen, understood, and its execution clearly illustrated.

After the play, teams were given time to plan how they would implement one or more of the concepts discussed in the play. To aid in this process, teachers were given a summary of the key concepts and implementation strategies the play highlighted. Teams were also given a chart, based on the research of DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many (2006) that asked participants to choose the task or goal (preferably a school goal they aimed to deepen), the resources required for effective implementation, indicators of accomplishment, leadership and teacher responsibility, and a date of completion. The goal of the task was for teachers to collaborate in a way that moved them from broad aims to specifics. Additional supports for this professional learning session included an example of a completed chart they could reference during the planning time. The student success teacher from each team was also trained on the

¹ Student success teachers are responsible for a variety of initiatives that are aimed at engaging students who might be considered "at-risk" of not successfully completing secondary school. Duties include advocating and increased contact with students through mentoring, monitoring of student attendance, etc.

implementation tool a few weeks prior to the event so s/he could guide their teams through the task after the play.

At the end of the 2-hour planning session, all 110 educators who viewed the play and participated in the professional learning task were asked to complete a survey. This survey aimed to understand educators' perceptions and attitudes about using theatre to disseminate research. Surveys consisted of Likert-scale questions to rate interviewees' responses equally. Spaces were available after each question for open-ended responses, so audience members could provide additional comments if they felt inclined. This methodology was chosen because it is one of the three major methodologies that have been used to evaluate research-based theatre. Unstructured feedback and highly structured quantitative surveys are the other two main methodologies used to disseminate research-based theatre (Beliveau & Lee, 2011).

There was a 77% response rate to the survey. 46% of survey respondents offered comments. These comments were analyzed using MAXqda2 computer software and categorized by themes that naturally arose from the surveys.

Findings and Discussion

This research study aimed to gain an initial understanding of educators' perceptions and attitudes about the use of theatre as a way to disseminate research. The survey results were very positive. Ninety-three percent of educators who completed the survey indicated that theatre was a useful method for transferring research into practice (ranking of 4/5 or 5/5). of survey participants felt that the strategies the play outlined were easy to implement (ranking of 4/5 or 5/5), and 93% of audience members felt that a play was an easy way to understand research findings (ranking 4/5 or higher). The enthusiasm for this professional learning format was also shown in the comments left by 61% of the survey respondents who provided additional comments. The comments were all positive and referred to how the play was "realistic", "very enjoyable", a "fun way to learn", and a "definitely more interesting method to transmit the information to teachers than a more conventional method."

The autoethnographic nature of the play may have been one of the reasons for these positive responses. While the experiences and characters in the play were ones the researcher had herself experienced in practice, they were generic enough that the educators in the audience could also relate to them. Scenes from the play aimed to resonate with practitioners intellectually, practically, and emotionally by mirroring (and sometimes criticizing) their lived experience. By generating empathetic responses and their own personal memories, teachers may have been able to connect more closely to the play and its messages (Denzin, 2001).

Prior learning could be another reason why educators felt that theatre was an easy way to understand research findings. Many of the implementation strategies outlined in the play were already familiar to the audience. There was some new learning, but many of the concepts were already established as “best practices” in the district. The play reinforced these best practices and provided a visual example of these strategies in action. Perhaps if new concepts were offered in situations or with dialogue that the educators in the audience were unfamiliar with, educators may have felt the concepts more difficult to grasp. However, this play aimed to cement prior learning and to resonate with educators’ lived experience. This may be why the educator audience members felt the play was a useful method to transfer research into practice.

Educator audience members were also asked in the post-performance survey if they thought the ideas learned from the play were more long-lasting and/or memorable compared to traditional professional learning activities. The majority of participants (87%) rated their answer at 4/5 or 5/5. As one person noted: “the engagement of the audience was much more obvious in this format. There was complete silence during the play’s running time, compared to other PD.”

Audience members may have felt that the play was memorable and more long-lasting than traditional professional learning activities because ethnodramas, especially those enhanced by the skills of an experienced artist, include more impactful, emotion-evoking dialogue – perhaps more so than a PowerPoint presentation or a professional article (Saldaña, 2010). This theatrical production, in particular, aimed to balance the artistic with the research elements. It was meant to entertain, but it also meant to highlight the issues of why many at-risk students are not succeeding in school, and what educators can do to aid this situation. Research ideas and concepts were represented, but the plotline and characters were written to connect with educators emotionally. The story-centered nature of theatre may be a reason why the audience felt a play to be more long-lasting than traditional professional learning activities. Another reason the play may have been perceived as memorable may have been because using theatre in professional learning sessions is non-traditional. Educators are used to attending workshops and conference presentations. These are traditional methods of disseminating research results. Theatre is outside the mainstream and atypical, which may make it more memorable.

Educators who viewed the play were asked if they felt the play sparked discussion in their team and if the play inspired him or her to take action in their school. Eighty nine percent of educators who viewed the play felt it did (ranking of 3/5 or higher). Twenty four percent of respondents also left a comment at the bottom of their survey indicating how beneficial and meaningful the play was because not only did it highlight the student voice, but students themselves (often those not successful in school) were performing the play. By seeing scenes

that teachers can personally relate to, now through the lens of the student, it may have inspired educators. Learning from students can be an effective method of communication if teachers take into consideration the messages that students are communicating (Bragg, 2001). Due to the power differential between students and teachers, student voice has rarely been part of educational discussions. Student voice is often promoted as a vehicle to enhance student learning and improve schools, but the opportunity for teachers to learn from students has typically received less attention (Nelson, 2015). In this professional learning session, it appears that many educators were engaged and initially inspired to take action from hearing the student voice in the play. Whether these effects were indeed long-lasting is difficult to discern, as educators were only surveyed the day of the performance.

Another theme that arose from 24% of the educators who completed the post-performance survey, was that they felt that the people who most needed to view or be inspired by the play were not in attendance. As one person stated: “the play was excellent, but it would have more purpose with a different target audience, as [we] are the ones that are trying to spread these messages in schools. Here, it’s sort of the idea of preaching to the choir.” This statement reflects both educational research and lived experience in education. The “Believers”, as Anthony Muhammad (2009) calls them, have a strong presence on school improvement teams, curriculum initiatives and voluntary committees, and demonstrate a willingness to put forth more than the required effort at school. In this case study, they were the audience: educators who have been interviewed and selected for positions because of their commitment to school. The other types of educators, those who may be more resistant to change, were not in the audience. Fullan (2007) states that resisters deserve respect because their influence is crucial to navigating the politics of implementation. Having these teacher in attendance may have sparked more discussion and the play’s effects may have been more long-lasting if all teachers had been in the audience, as opposed to just “the Believers”.

Lastly, educators were asked if they felt that the implementation tool was a helpful way to transfer the play’s concepts into practice. Ninety six percent of educators felt it was (ranking of 3/5 or higher). Additional comments were also offered. For example, one person stated how “the handout was critical in explaining the play”, while another said “it is important to apply next steps because conversation arises but the action is still in question.” These responses reflect the research, which indicates that if a message is not clear and reinforced by earlier or sustained messages, any dissemination method will have limited capability of making lasting change. That is why this play was part of a larger district implementation strategy. The play was another way to reinforce messages and implementation strategies the district was already promoting.

Conclusion

Knowledge mobilization is the transfer and translation of knowledge between research and practice. While theatre has rarely been used as a method to disseminate research, this study shows us that there is reason to be optimistic about its use. The majority of the participants who viewed the research-based play indicated that theatre is an effective method for mobilizing research findings to practitioners in education. Survey participants also felt that a play is an easy way to understand research findings, is more memorable compared to traditional learning activities, it increased their knowledge of research findings, and the play inspired them to take action. These positive responses could have been related to many factors. For example, the play was autoethnographic, but written with generic experiences and characters that all educators could relate to. The play balanced art and research, aiming to both entertain and inform the audience. At-risk students were performers of the play, which is both atypical of a professional learning session and impactful because of the message of the play itself. The play deepened current district messages to an audience of keen, enthusiastic educators, and the post-performance survey was completed the day of the event when the experience was still fresh. Any of these factors may have contributed to the educators' positive responses to using theatre as a way to disseminate research. While there is still much more we need to know about this topic, as this is one case study and its long-term effects have not been gauged at this time, this study does suggest that the use of theatre holds great potential for effectively disseminating research to practitioners in education.

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Carl Leggo	University of British Columbia, Canada	Jackie Wiggins	Oakland University, USA
Lillian Lewis	Youngstown State University		