BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS THROUGH RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS *BY KRISTAN VENEGAS*

Abstract

The goal of this essay is to explore ways that researchers and practitioners can work together to build trust in research collaborations. The essay considers building trust through research in three ways: (1) how researchers can work with practitioners to develop meaningful research designs; (2) how researchers and practitioners can collaborate around the technical aspects of research, including getting access to quantitative datasets and getting into qualitative fieldwork settings, and (3) how practitioners can work with researchers to make strategic improvements based on research findings.

Introduction

Trust plays a key role in research collaborations. As Kramer and Tyler (1996) suggest, trust impacts the key social functions including cooperation, coordination, and performance. Their work focuses on developing trust within organizations. In many ways, developing a collaborative research partnership is like developing a new organization. Informal and formal cultures are developed. Structures for leadership and processes for communication, the creation of mutual goals and implementation are established. Bolman and Deal's (2011) descriptions of organizational culture can apply here. Like organizational cultures, research collaborations can take on one or more of the four organizational frames that Bolman and Deal have identified --- symbolic, political, human resource, and structural organizational frames. A *symbolic organization* is one that functions largely based on the prevalence of heroes, metaphors, stories, myths, ritual, and ceremonies. *Political structures* are dominated by power, resources, competition and related networks. *Human resource lead organizations* focus on people and human nature in relation to the organization. Finally, *structural organizations* rely on goals, outcomes, tasks, and functions. It's possible to see how these different frameworks can shape or reshape research collaborations operating in different settings.

When I look back on the various researcher and practitioner relationships that I have built over the last decade or more, I can easily recall what a difference it makes on a research project when it is possible to build trust between myself, my research team and the partner organizations. I've learned that trust is slowly gained and even more easily lost. I can see how the organizational culture supported or constrained our work on different projects. For example, I have worked in large school districts that are so centralized and structural that even obtaining permission to conduct research has become a months-long process. Of course,

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sometimes these things are a matter of structure, but other times they really are a matter of trust. Do practitioners "trust" the research and researchers enough to give access formally and informally for a successful project? Authentic collaborations are key.

When working with large organizations and/or in large research teams, trust can be even more difficult to obtain. If trust is about relationships, the more relationships there are to manage, the more difficult it is to maintain clear communication. In this essay, I reflect on (1) how researchers can work with practitioners to develop meaningful research designs and (2) how researchers and practitioners can collaborate around the technical aspects of research. The examples that I use are based on experiences in qualitative and mixed methods studies. As a qualitative researcher, I cannot offer informed insight on how singularly quantitative studies might be negotiated. In this essay, I draw from my own experience, as well as from course discussions and other experiences in policy and practice audiences. It's also important to note that I worked as a student affairs practitioner for a number of years before becoming a researcher, so the challenges of being a practitioner were once a constant part of my own reality. I continue to teach in a program that trains student affairs, advising, and outreach professionals, so I continue to hear about and think through practitioner realities. My research agenda focuses on college access and financial aid for low-income students and students of color, so most of my work is built in collaboration with high schools, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations that provide direct service to these student populations.

Developing Meaningful Research Designs

A research design that is uninformed by literature is considered to be weak. Why shouldn't the same thing also be said about designs in educational research that are not distinctly practical in context or grounded in practice? Some of the most creative and effective research designs that I have been a part of are the result of a process that can be described as follows. First, researchers develop a set of research questions and a design to answer those questions. This typically includes a number of tools for gathering data, which supported by previous research and a conceptual or theoretical framework. Then, if the research team does not already have a pre-selected site or set of sites in mind, they might begin to think about with whom and how it might be possible to develop a partnership to answer these questions and support this research design. A reasonable next step is that the researcher and the research site come together to make sure that the design is a good fit. There are usually adjustments to the design, in an attempt to further maximize on the researchable opportunities within the collaboration. Ideally, the researchers and the practitioner collaborators agree on the design, so much so that a true collaboration is formed.

Of course, the steps that I have described above are idealistic. These prescribed steps assume that:

- the researchers are willing to take the time to engage in a thorough understanding of the context of the research organization;

- the practitioner-based organization is truly open to and can accommodate a research collaboration;

- the key decision maker from each organization will make sure that both researchers and practitioners are around the table, and finally,

- when decisions are made, they will be implemented in a way that honors the knowledge and expertise of everyone.

This last assumption might be the most important one of them all, because each of these steps assumes a level of trust either has been or will be established. I often think back to a conversation that I had with a practitioner about a set of focus groups that we had conducted with students and parents. We were collaborating on a project as part of a college preparation program that served at-risk youth in a low-income high school. My research team was the 3rd research team to examine this program in less than five years. Their previous experiences with focus groups had soured them to the idea. The practitioners on site had been unfairly burdened to assist with participant selection and other research-related details in the past. But because my colleagues and I had attended to our focus groups with attention to detail and made sure that we recruited our own participants, and kept the practitioner team up to date on our progress along the way, we had changed the mind of this individual. She shared that the experience was "owned by your team, I was able to sit back, watch them happen, and enjoy the idea of seeing my students and parent participate." The individual was excited to see our data and welcomed us to continue to come to campus over the next two years of the project. This practitioner wanted a more hands-off approach to participating in the research project, but still wanted to make sure that her service population was excited but also protected throughout the research project. As one of her co-workers shared, "These kids have enough asked of them already, and so we do we as program staff; we need to protect our time and their [the students] paths."

Trust Means Risk

What does it mean to take risks in these organizations, especially in ones where the primary clients themselves might be labeled as "at-risk"? The conversation that I mentioned above exemplifies the awareness that I must have with working within the particular research area that I have chosen to pursue. Though arguably, any population could be at some level of risk when they share their opinions as part of research that seeks to evaluate oneself and could lead to change. Given this delicate web of risk, how can we include practitioners and their service populations as equal partners in our work?

As noted in this section, one way is to lay the groundwork for a solid collaboration is giving the practitioner-collaborators opportunities to actively engage in the discussion and planning of a research design. I've outlined some of the overarching steps and given an example of implementation. I conclude this section with a short list of recommendations:

1. Be prepared to explain methodological approaches and tools, as well as confidentiality and duty to report. These issues will come up in the discussion on technical collaborations, but these key items should be iterated throughout the research process as a means of informing the research site, but also as part of honoring the population that you will study.

2. Initiate conversations with the practitioners are who are closest to being "on ground" with the population that you will study. If you are studying high school students, try to meet with teachers and counselors and/or observe them at work. If possible, ask them how they might engage in answering the questions that you are studying.

3. Meet with administrators who work with your study population. They will offer connected, but more distal perceptions about what should be studied and possibly what data-gathering approaches might or might not work at this site and the rationale for those recommendations.

4. There may be cases in which you will be at a site with active and or emerging researchers. Given that we are in the field of education, it's not unlikely that one or more individuals on site are seeking a master's or doctoral degree. Again, it's not likely that they will be leading the work, but they are likely to want to have more engaged conversations about the design.

Either way, it's crucial *to ask for collaboration*. You might not receive it, but at least you will have given the organization a chance to authentically participate. At some points in writing this essay, I'm feeling a little preachy, and I don't like the way that this feels, but it seems like it's worth it to lay out these basic recommendations. I once worked at a high school site studying college preparation and college access for over a year. I met with the guidance counselors at the beginning of the year and had in-depth discussions about my research questions and research design. They had little feedback for the research design except to say that I need to be aware of the nuances of their student population. This was valuable advice and I made sure to use it. I sent updates about the work throughout the next nine months on that campus. I never received acknowledgement or a response. It wasn't until my 2nd to last email when I asked to meet to share results that I received a response from the guidance team to share my preliminary findings. During that meeting, a counselor shared that he had stopped reading my emails closely after the first few because he "knew the research plan and didn't have time to check in." He sort of apologized, but again because he knew the plan, he felt informed enough to trust me for a long stretch of the project without checking in. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of how researchers and practitioners can work together on the technical aspects of research.

Collaborating on the Technical Aspects of Research

I once worked on a short-term project with a fellow researcher who was about two years ahead of me in the field and thought that because of that I should be considered "junior" to her. She consistently ignored my ideas and would give me the "grunt work" administrative tasks to lead while she headed the more creative and analytical processes. Now, why I allowed her to do that is one issue, but the end goal for me was that I did not want to work with her again. I've seen these kinds of things happen between practitioners and researchers—it's not a good thing. I tell this story here because in this section, when I write about the "technical" aspects of research, I want to be clear that this part of a collaborative relationship does not mean that practitioners order the coffee and cookies, while the researcher comes into interview the program administration. There are layers of problems with these kinds of uneven collaborations, but I want to highlight a few examples of technical collaborations that have been successful.

I am currently on a project that examines a state-wide set of learning communities. Our qualitative research team meets regularly with the program directors at each site. The research team is able to respond to any questions that the program directors might have. We are able to gather advice from them and ask clarifying questions about upcoming site visits. The research team consistently uses their advice to inform the next steps in our data collection. We may observe additional events or review additional documents because of their valuable expertise. Their advice truly guides our work.

In another recent project, I worked with a non-profit organization on a short term, small-scale evaluation of their scholarship program that was administered through multiple sites. The protocol for the evaluation was developed in collaboration with the non-profit organization and pilot tested, but I still felt like something fell short within the protocols and that I might be missing a key piece of the puzzle. Because this was a short term, small-scale project, there was not a lot of time to do additional work in preparation for my interviews with the scholarship program administrators. During the interviews, one of the most powerful questions from the interview protocol was “is there anything about the [scholarship] program that I didn’t ask you, but you think I should know more about?” This one question empowered the administrators to share a wealth of information about their concerns, hopes, and ideas about the value and possible improvements to increase the purchasing power of the scholarship awards.

The examples noted here may seem like small adjustments or actions, but they give voice and power to the practitioners. Some additional considerations are noted below:

1. Ask for advice and information, but don’t assign tasks. When working in research settings, it’s likely that the individuals that you are collaborating with already have full work commitments. Expecting them to do additional work is not a necessary element of collaboration.

2. Don’t expect that your practitioner collaborators have research experience. They may have important thoughts on the context of an organization, which can lend itself to the design, they may also understand how certain aspects of research works, but that doesn’t mean that they will understand the technical aspects of research, nor should they be expected to assist you in conducting research. In other words, gathering data or announcing an interview opportunity is ok, expecting them to recruit interviewees is not.

3. At the same time, if there are individuals at a site who are very interested in learning more about research and its implementation, seek to find spaces for them to appropriately participate.

4. Finally, part of being collaborative, maybe especially in the technical aspects of research, means communicating your work, including the process of your work as it occurs. As mentioned in the example above, it may be as simple as asking a practitioner on a regular basis—what should I be doing that I haven’t yet thought about?

Collaborations involving the technical aspects of the research can occur in large and small ways. When practitioners and researchers are open to ongoing dialogue about flow and process of data collection, new ways of investigating a problem and deeper levels of understanding about a project may emerge. An ongoing respectful request for collaboration is one of the most meaningful ways to continue to maintain trust and honor their commitments to the research as well as your own.

Final Thoughts

This piece was difficult to write, because it required a level of vulnerability and self-reflection that can sometimes be risky as a researcher. Researchers in the academy are socialized to be entrepreneurial and focus on making the most strategic of relationships. In that way, developing practitioner-based collaborations and really focusing on their development might mean that one would have to "sacrifice" more traditional accomplishments as a result of engaging in the messy edges of a collaborative project. I will always appreciate my colleagues in research and in practice arenas who are willing to make these choices in hopes of answering the often messy problems present in collaborative action-oriented research.

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