Improving Research Through User Engagement

María del Mar Prados Gallardo[1]

1) Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, Universidad de Sevilla, Spain.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Review

One criticism that is often made to researchers in social sciences is the lack of connection between their research and interests and needs that exist in the study field. For instance, in the case of educational research, it is common to enter the classroom to collect data in order to analyze it and try to answer some research questions –which are, undoubtedly, important– but without taking into account the needs of the educational community. Furthermore, the results of this type of research are, at best, reported in scientific journals, which are not usually accessible to those communities. For that reason, the impact of educational research is usually far from what the researchers would like to be. Similarly, the flow of information between academics and policy-makers is very limited. In this sense, research does not influence policy as much as its policy-makers would like.

   "Relationships between researchers and research users are the key to ensuring that research is relevant and timely" (p. 7). This is the main thesis of the book. The arguments and examples presented in this work stem of the Thematic Seminar Series "Making difference: working with users to develop educational research" within ESRC´s Teaching and Learning Research Programme in UK. Five one-day seminars were held in 2005 and 2006, which served as a forum for discussion to examine the processes and implications of user engagement in teaching and learning funded research. The participants in the seminar were university researchers, senior civil servants, representatives of funding organizations, education practitioners, research mediators, government

analysts and policy advisors, researchers from education, social and health workers, a few parents and carers as well as children and young people The authors see user engagement in research as a means for bringing together different practices in a common endeavor, each of them with its particular area of expertise and value-laden goals. But it is important to emphasize that it is not a question of any type of participation. Therefore, "a key theme is that user engagement should be seen as an opportunity for flows of knowledge from the field of study to research and from research to the field of study" (p.17). That is, "an approach to research that engages with the motivations and anticipations of the participant and the demands that they face" (p. 19).

Throughout the book we can see five broad approaches to working with user engagement: creating feedback loops, university-led participatory research, combing small-scale studies, co-research for conceptual development and user-led research. In the first two approaches knowledge is negotiated across boundaries between research and professional practices; in the other three approaches knowledge is negotiated within research projects that operated as sites of intersecting practices where new understandings are co-constructed (p. 33). Despite differences, all five types of engagement involve, to some degree, important challenges for project management, such as: a) to make explicit the purposes and motives of each participant and to negotiate power issues, roles and ownership during projects; b) to schedule different timescales for different groups of participants depending on the different rhythms in the organization in which they are based or c) to develop new forms of relational expertise, in order to strengthen the mutual commitment and research itself. These challenges require specific skills such as the ability to recognize and work alongside the expertise and motives of other professionals.

Finally, the challenges of user engagements have important implications for researchers and research projects –the repercussions for research design and project management, recognition of the importance of" know who" and "know when" within researchers' skills and expertise, training courses for early career researchers and project leaders, or to increase the funding associated with the smooth operation of user engagement– and for research users –the expectations of users to engage with research vary for different users, infrastructure and also

depending on the support for research engagement or training courses available for research users–.

Undoubtedly, after reading the book, it is clear that user engagement is closely related with both the overall relevance and the improvement of quality research and with wider knowledge enhancing production and research use and impact.

María del Mar Prados Gallardo
Universidad de Sevilla
marprados@us.es