

## Research and Policy: Antithetical or Complementary?

Barbara Cambridge

Just over a week ago I was in the office of the US Secretary of Education. Three NCTE members were interviewing the Secretary about literacy and federal policy. When the teachers had finished their conversation with the Secretary, he asked about the Connected Learning Coalition, a group of six organizations representing different content areas, including NCTE, that have banded together around a set of six learning principles. He asked me an unexpected question in relation to the Coalition's work, "What do YOU want ME to do?" On the fly, I asked that he acknowledge in public statements that education associations are unified in their commitment to literacy as the foundation of all learning and that he consult the Coalition to discuss how to improve teaching and learning in a systemic way. My suggestions were certainly not profound or earthshaking, but, if adopted, would help highlight the centrality of literacy in learning and would help dispel the notion of some policy makers that people in disciplines are only self-referential.

My answer to Secretary Duncan was research based in that the Connected Learning Coalition, which includes science, math, social studies, instructional technology, career and tech, and English, had spent almost two years generating a set of principles around which it had coalesced, examining research as well as practice to decide on the principles. The Coalition exists to be called on and to assert the importance of integrated learning because it has a research base but also because it has built relationships among executive directors and association boards that enable the principles to be called into action. In answering Secretary Duncan's question, I thought about the research-based principles but also about the circumstances of his office. One circumstance of his office is that he has a bully pulpit, and a second is that he needs ready access to information from professionals, which I will later define as intermediaries, in important decision-making circumstances.

I begin with this recent experience because it speaks to how policy makers can get information for decision making. Yet, in this political climate it's easy to identify conditions that work against considered decision making based on research findings. *You* can already identify such conditions, which include adherence to ideology regardless of evidence, distorted loyalty to party rather than country, and inability to consider something rationally and passionately at the same time.

Today, fully recognizing these barriers, I'd like to focus on research that helps us sort through the current use or lack of use of research by policy makers. Then I will suggest what you might choose to do in your roles as citizens, writers, researchers, teachers, and writing program administrators to promote effective decision making and policy setting.

First, two excellent resources can help us understand the relationship between research and policymaking. The first is a 2009 report, written by Steven R. Nelson, James C. Leffler, and Barbara A. Hansen, based on a study conducted from fall 2008-spring 2009 by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the Center for Knowledge Use in Education. The study included structured focus groups and individual interviews of 65 influential leaders in six groups of federal, state, and local educational interests, including congressional staff members, deputy state commissioners of education, state education committee legislators, school board trustees, school district superintendents, and school district staff. The report is entitled "Toward a Research Agenda for Understanding and Improving the Use of Research Evidence."

This study yielded answers to five questions concerning educational policy and practice:

What factors influence change?

What evidence is used?

What are barriers to using research evidence?

What facilitates using research evidence?, and

What sources of research evidence are used?

You may feel discouraged, even if you are not surprised, by the findings from the first question about what factors influence change in educational policy and practice. Study participants asserted many other factors currently take precedence over research evidence, including "political perspectives, public sentiment, potential legal pitfalls, economic considerations, pressure from the media, and the welfare of individuals" (2). Not one par-

ticipant in this particular study identified research findings that they felt had a dramatic effect on practice or policy.

Barriers to the use of research abound: lack of sophistication in interpreting research, “time constraints, the volume of research evidence available, the format in which it is presented, and the difficulty in applying research evidence to their own situations.” These barriers are linked to an “underlying belief that much research is not to be trusted or is, at least, severely limited in its potential applicability.” Survey participants felt that “research could be shaped to say anything, that one piece of research often conflicts with another, and that much research is not timely for users’ needs. . . . The preference for research evidence that links to their local context was the strongest need identified by all study groups” (2).

Research, however, was seen as useful if it comes from trusted sources. Intermediaries, described as “unbiased organizations and individuals that can help locate, sort, and prioritize the available research” serve an important role (3). “Policymakers and practitioners appear to have a special relationship with small groups of ‘trusted individuals,’ who are valued as credible, objective sources of information. It appears that intermediaries are in a prime position to help users aggregate, translate, and apply research evidence directly to specific, local issues” (3).

If policymakers do sometimes use research evidence, why are they interested and when? A second resource can help us with those questions, a 2010 book by Karen Bogenschneider and Thomas J. Corbett from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Although this rich resource, entitled *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Insights from Policy-Minded Researchers and Research-Minded Policymakers*, addresses many topics, we’ll use it today to look at the reasons for using research and the characteristics of research in which policymakers show interest.

In annual interviews with one set of policymakers, state legislators, Bogenschneider and Corbett found four main reasons that legislators use research: (1) to help make good decisions, (2) to help avoid making mistakes in the details, (3) to earn the respect of colleagues and constituents, and (4) to build support for legislation they want to pass (27–32).

(1) Making good decisions is important to legislators. One fourteen-year incumbent with a good sense of humor said to researchers,

“This is a job that you are hungry for information. I mean, you can’t have enough information. Political or whatever . . . people in this job . . . are always striving to know stuff. When we pass a law, first of all, we want it to work, at least until we’re out of office. You do research and need information . . . to make you feel that you are doing the right thing.” (Bogenschneider and Corbett 27)

(2) Avoiding mistakes in details is a second reason for using research. When legislators have an established position on an issue but haven't worked out details of a piece of legislation, they reported to Bogenschneider and Corbett that research "at the front end of the policymaking process (can) help avoid making bad decisions" (29). For example, one legislator stated, "Once in a while, you find something on the other side that's so strong that you flip your position. Good information, no matter what side of the issue, is important, but the most invaluable is the kind that saves you from yourself" (29).

(3) Legislators known for their depth of knowledge about a certain topic value research on that topic so that others can rely on their judgment. Advice-giving legislators are often identified as "go-to" legislators, or in scientific studies, "cue-givers." "Relying on the expertise of their colleagues is a conscious attempt to build efficiency into a system that has become more and more complex" (31). A fourteen-year veteran of the legislative process explains it like this:

Let me tell you how the legislature works. I mean, we have about an inch of knowledge. We know a little bit about a lot of things. And so what we really do, we research as much on a topic as we want to. If you're the chair of a committee, or a ranking member of a committee, but especially if you're the chair or it's your bill, you really research it a lot. You dig into things or try to, because that's your area of expertise. The way that the system works is on a trust factor because we all can't know everything about everything. So we have people who chair committees or are ranking members or serve on committees that vote and send bills to the floor, and we trust our colleagues' judgment on these pieces of legislation. We trust that they did their homework. (30)

(4) A fourth use of research is to build support for legislation that a legislator wants passed. So, "research can be useful in partisan politics not only to provide direction that will guide legislation toward its intended goals but also to provide ammunition that will enhance the prospects of its eventual passage" (31).

If, then, research does, in fact, in certain circumstances get used for multiple purposes, what are the qualities of the research that evoke its use? In Bogenschneider and Corbett's work, the same five characteristics topped the chart for both elected officials and agency officials: (1) the scientific quality of the research is high, (2) the research is unbiased, (3) research findings are available at the time decisions are being made, (4) research

reports provide brief summaries of key findings, and (5) research findings are understandably written (39).

Let's turn now to how these findings about research and policy making can apply specifically to you as a writing faculty member or a writing program administration. What can you do to bring together research and policy making? I have five suggestions.

1. LEARN TO KNOW THE POLICYMAKERS WHOM YOU WANT TO INFORM: THEIR VALUES, THEIR KNOWLEDGE BASES, AND THE CONDITIONS OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL POLITICAL LIVES.

As rhetoricians we understand the importance of audience, yet we sometimes ignore the circumstances. For example, raise your hand if you know the name of the Representative to the federal government from your district. Now raise your hand if you have communicated with that Representative in the past six months.

You may or may not yet know your Representative, but I would contend you should. If you care about the existence of Pell Grants, for example, you need to know where your representative came down during the near fatal defunding of a major part of the Pell Grant program this spring. Because that funding will come up again in the future, how will you make a case that students with weak backgrounds in writing, whether from attending poor urban public schools encumbered with some of the least prepared teachers in the country or from being a recent immigrant for whom English is a second language, especially need Pell Grants to enter colleges and universities?

If you care about the continued professional learning that school teachers need to keep abreast of emergent knowledge about composition and about technologies that influence writing processes, how will you make a case with a legislator who may have heard recently from teachers that current professional development activities are a waste of money and that they need job-embedded time with other teachers to continue to grow in their profession?

Legislators, of course, are not the only policy makers whom you want to get to know. Remembering that research shows that you should develop relationships *with* policymakers before delivering recommendations *to* them, consider, say, your local school board. In the March, 2011 *American School Board Journal* an article called "The Right Call: How and When Should You Use Research to Influence and Enhance Decisions?" the authors report results of a team observation of 140 committee and school board meetings between September 2, 2009 and August 31, 2010. These

meetings included controversial subjects during which over six hundred citizens testified. Authors drew the conclusion that determining what the audience, in this case the school board members, knows about the subject, what the competing interests are, and what examples or experience might help explain the research are key in preparing ahead for using research in discussions about pending decisions.

A citizen wanting to use research in explaining a point of view may smartly tie it to values of the community for which decisions are being made. For example, you may know all the research there is to know about the advantages and disadvantages of dual enrollment composition courses, but you need to know all you can also about the context of the community whose school board is considering, say, expanding the number of such courses. If the local paper has repeatedly reported on a need to increase the number of local students attending and completing college, if the parent group has recently supported having more AP classes, and if your college has had little prior contact at the school board level, you must tailor your information about dual enrollment classes to this situation. Do you have the trust of the school board members in your credibility on the subject for them to listen to you parade the downsides of dual enrollment? Will you be seen as elitist, viewing reality from an ivory tower? Do you have information about the success rate in second-semester college composition classes of students who entered with dual enrollment credits versus AP credits? In other words, have you anticipated the values and experiences of the school board and of the other citizens who will be at the meeting?

Knowing your audience seems a given, and you may be wondering why I bring it up. I do so because I see advocates at the federal level bring to visits with legislative staff and with legislators uninformed assumptions about their audience. Often visitors expect ignorance. They assume that if staffers and legislators only knew what they know, the laws would look different. They neglect to consider the conflictual context of the political setting, the fact that staffers and legislators are responsible for a wide range of topics, and that federal law must accommodate fifty states with all their diversities. These conditions necessarily influence the decision-making processes of staff members and legislators.

In his recent book, *Solidarity or Service: Composition & the Problem of Expertise*, John Trimbur writes,

Material conditions are a necessary part of any proper understanding of the lived experience of professional work and the formation of professional identities and desires. It helps us see that the professions are

not monolithic entities or actors in their own right but rather internally stratified social formations where life chances are fashioned and refashioned in highly volatile and insecure circumstances. (189)

Because policy making is fraught with “volatile and insecure circumstances,” knowing those conditions is important in attempting to work with a policy maker. Getting to know the person and the conditions for that person’s work can help refine a sense of that policy maker as audience for the information to be shared from research and/or practice.

Research on research-minded policymakers shows that they listen best to people whom they trust from knowing over time. I recommend visiting your federal district Representative in person at least once a year during his or her weeks at the home district office. The purpose of these visits is to build relationship. Then you may be ready when the time is ripe to provide the information that will be heard and used in decision making.

Borgenschneider and Corbett report that they heard over and over again that policymakers prefer presentations over written materials. Lawmaking comes with an oral tradition: lawmakers are elected through interpersonal skills, they operate by “hearing constituent concerns, listening to testimony, questioning lobbyists, and talking with legislative colleagues” (45). Although you have to make extra effort to talk with your legislator in person, establishing your tie to the legislator through this face-to-face visit places you within the oral tradition that is part of the legislator’s profession. Borgenschneider and Corbett conclude: “If there is one insight that is repeated endlessly in this book, it is that policymakers respond to people they know and trust” (51).

They also conclude “The most valuable work may no longer be to generate new policy ideas but rather to create a space for talk and discussion outside the contested turf of bureaucratic and partisan warfare” (51). Each of us needs to be that known and trusted person for at least one policymaker. If you haven’t yet developed that kind of relationship with at least one policy maker, I challenge you to do so.

#### RECOMMENDATION 2: BE KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT EMERGENT POLICY ISSUES.

Like politicians, we have much on our minds, much to keep track of in our professional lives. So, it is easy to get frustrated and even disgusted by the contradictory reports we hear about issues being considered by our legislators or the media hype around conflicts when we have to guess if they are real or not. Tracking issues over time aids us in better judging whether a

policy issue is stagnant, either dormant or stagnant in its inflexibility, or whether a policy issue is still malleable.

Although there are many reasons to identify the malleable policy issues, let's consider one reason directly related to faculty members and program administrators. Faculty members in many colleges and universities have to build a research agenda in order to advance in their profession. This cultural context means that researchers are often engaged in long-term research projects, tackling particular elements of research questions in a sequential way. Even if they wanted to tackle a public policy issue, by the time they could incorporate that issue in some coherent way into their research work, the public policy issue may have already been taken up and decided. If you are known by your policy makers and they turn to you, if you are unable to provide the information they need, your credibility decreases immediately.

I'm not advocating intellectual ambulance chasing, but I am suggesting that every faculty member's intellectual and research agenda could include a policy issue that warrants continued attention so that when a need emerges, the faculty member, like the Congressional committee chair or ranking member, has the background to speak to the emerging issue. Bogenschneider and Corbett state that "the ideal points of interaction between research and public interest should begin not when research is complete but rather when the questions of interest are initially formulated" (17).

CWPA, NWP, and NCTE have modeled this kind of anticipatory knowledge awareness and sharing in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* document they published within the last year. I have distributed the piece to every legislative aide with whom I've met since its publication. As the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act continues to progress, albeit probably not happening until after the 2012 election, through this publication legislative staff have a basis for considering content and language in the bill. The piece did not come at a precise decision making time but in anticipation of it. Timeliness can mean "just in time" but it can also mean "ahead of time."

I want to raise the possibility of each writing program administrator in this country taking on one issue to know about and to share "ahead of time" or to know about and be ready to share "just in time." Writing assessment is an example of one such issue. Keith Gilyard wrote persuasively in an NCTE publication last year that K-12 issues are college and university issues. Right now, as two multi-state assessment consortia are generating tests to measure progress toward the new Common Core Standards adopted by almost all our states, many people are nervous about what the writing assessments will look like. Writing program administrators, who know more about writing assessment than most anyone else, need to get

involved with this emergent issue. Could you be reporting to these consortia research that supports the importance of assessing actual student work, or could you be incorporating into your own research agenda examination of writing assessments that do and don't support better writing? Who else will do this?

Different WPAs might track different emergent issues, including writing assessment. Could the Council of Writing Program Administrators keep a record of who is tracking what? Just like for legislators, there are too many subjects for writing program administrators to be more than an inch deep on all of them. CWPA could promote the availability of knowledgeable members to turn to in finding out about an issue, especially if there is a need to enter into advocacy concerning it or to supply information for a local context.

RECOMMENDATION #3: INCLUDE IN ALL EXPOSITORY WRITING CLASSES WRITING FOR THE PUBLIC.

I'm not suggesting having an assignment now or then or the option of an assignment, but the requirement of an assignment in every expository writing class. I'm charged about this topic for several reasons. First, civic discourse these days is marked by dishonesty, skewed information, opinion masked as fact, and either-or propositions when a continuum of choices is possible. Although some people claim that that's just part of politics, I'm convinced that the problem is currently exacerbated by policy makers so buried in ideology that they are unable or unwilling to peek out to see anything beyond their own focus. We are in a crisis in more than one way, but one way is rhetorically.

Trimbur points out in *Solidarity or Service* that there has been a turn in U.S. college composition courses toward community literacy projects and writing for social advocacy. This turn has, as he puts it, "brought into view devalued and neglected genres, such as flyers, fact sheets, posters, press kits, visual displays of information, public service announcements, and so on" (188). Although Trimbur warns that this kind of writing can become only uncritical community service, he asserts that writing assignments, such as the design of social advocacy campaigns, "can lead to the critical investigation of how rhetorical situations are constructed, how rhetorical agency is distributed, and how various genres can coalesce counterpublics" (188). I challenge CWPA to take a stand about the obligation of those who know most about communicating to be sure that students are ready to have rhetorical agency in the current political climate. Responsibility for addressing the plague of incivility and the ascension of blind belief over

reason must be assumed by as many people in higher education as possible. Writing programs are one site for change.

A second reason that I am suggesting that every expository writing course include writing for the public is that we need to save narrative. Why do I say this? In the development of the Common Core Standards, which will drive curriculum in the over 40 states that have adopted them, making an argument is privileged over narrative. In fact, a chief architect of the Standards has publicly argued multiple times that narrative is overrated in current English courses. The central place of narrative in writing history or writing up scientific discoveries or making an argument has been denigrated. As curricula are developed for students who must demonstrate progress toward Common Core Standards, narrative may indeed get short shrift.

Another place that narrative is central, of course, is in policy making. One well-respected state senator has said, “If you give legislators the research and facts, and I tell a heart-wrenching story, I will win every time” (Borgenschneider and Corbett 41). Those of you who have participated in NCTE’s, NWP’s, or other Advocacy Days in DC know the power of the classroom story, the narrative of what effect a certain practice or policy has had in teaching or in students’ learning. On the flip side, when our DC-based Advocates for Literacy group visits a legislative aide to advocate for a bill, we often hear a story of the aide’s favorite teacher or a story about a relative who is a teacher who has influenced that aide’s approach to education policy. Students who consider public policy implications of topics they explore and who practice writing for a policymaker audience, including using narrative, can influence policy decision making and develop habits of inquiry and representation that contribute to the public good.

#### RECOMMENDATION #4: WORK HARD TO SERVE ON TENURE COMMITTEES.

Although some people in this room are not and will not be on tenure track lines at their college or university, in all institutions there are criteria for appointment, reappointment, and advancement. As you listen, please translate the underlying points in what I’m saying to your own situation. Although I’m focusing on tenure criteria, you can make the shift to application of those points to your own setting.

Creating or translating research for public use is often viewed in the academy as service, not professional or academic work. A professor at a large land-grant university in 2009 summarized this problem: “If you are an academic, there are no rewards for policy work, and I don’t care what they say at the top, public service is simply not given any respect” (Borgenschneider

and Corbett 186). Trimbur resists the formation of professional identities that stratify social formations within the university. He argues that writing for targeted audiences helps writers to “examine how genres of writing mediate the relations between experts and laypeople and problematize professional knowledges, their circulation, and relation to popular knowledges” (188). While I find Trimbur’s much more complicated argument about this compelling, I know that many writing program administrators do currently live in the stratified social formation inflicted by tenure. I know, therefore, that the criteria for tenure must be modified for the university to illustrate and have the power to help mitigate the civic arrangements and maladies that I described earlier in political realms outside the university.

To return more directly to the relationship of research and policy, I’ll report on an article from the June 3, 2011 *Education Week* issue that chilled my blood. In the “The Professionalism of Teaching: What NEA Surveys Tell Us About a Common Knowledge Base,” the author, Darrel Drury, claims that teaching has made little progress toward achieving full professional status because it relies on “expert judgment, best practices, and conventional wisdom” (1). Drury is, therefore, elated about the increased use of quasi-experimental and randomized, controlled designs that, according to him, constitute research in a profession.

Acknowledging that professional development schools are doing more of the kind of research he deems necessary, Drury laments, however, that the results are “useful for individual practitioners within specific contexts and for focusing attention on a common problem” but do not “translate into knowledge that can be brought to scale” (2). The fundamental question of what research is for comes into play here: isn’t research that applies to individual, local situations dealing with common problems there credible, useful, and part of the responsibility of researchers?

Is research more important than the individuals the researcher is studying? Drury aims at a certain kind of knowledge building for the field rather than for student learning. Drury suggests that “Professional-development schools could seek waivers to extend the school year to accommodate the administration of assessments designed to measure a wide range of educational outcomes” (2). This kind of thinking exemplifies one of Trimbur’s biggest nightmares: this move objectifies research subjects by professionals who care foremost not about those individuals’ welfare but about the professionals’ own work.

I use this extended example because scholarship about teaching and learning, including about writing in actual classrooms, may well focus on the local and be done with those who are part of and can learn from the scholarship. Rather than dictating a particular kind of research, even alter-

ing the material conditions for learning at the expense of teachers and students, those who evaluate research must value multiple kinds of research, conducted in different ways and for different purposes. And those purposes must include making good policy decisions without sacrificing students and teachers in the process.

The people in this room are all too familiar with the denigration by some of our colleagues of research of any kind applied to policy, including policies regarding writing instruction and curricula within the university. Yet, the research about policy making that we have begun to examine today emphasizes the importance of the local. Research used in policy decision making requires applicability to the local.

So back to the recommendation. Writing program faculty and administrators need to assume the responsibility of doing the tough work of changing the tenure criteria regarding research. Until colleges and universities wake up to the crisis in our political system; acknowledge their responsibility to address it in multiple ways, including figuring out how to generate and communicate research that applies to the system; and value those of its faculty members and administrators who develop expertise in that responsibility, colleges and universities are failing the society in which they operate.

**RECOMMENDATION #5: EDUCATE YOURSELF, STUDENTS, FACULTY MEMBERS, AND ADMINISTRATORS ABOUT THE POTENTIALLY POWERFUL FUNCTIONS OF RESEARCH IN POLICY MAKING.**

This last recommendation really serves as an umbrella for the other four. Composition teachers and writing program administrators have special abilities to communicate. They must use their rhetorical prowess to educate students and colleagues about the potential, system-changing possibilities of the use of research in policy making.

Bogenschneider and Corbett can help our thinking here one last time today. They identify five shifts that can happen when sound research is brought to the “real world of doing public policy,” shifts in

Allocations	altering how resources are distributed
Tactics	altering how policies and programs are designed
Solutions	altering how policies and programs are pursued
Framework	altering how we basically think about certain social issues
Salience	altering how much importance we give to an issue
Awareness	altering even how we think about doing policy

(293)

Research and Policy Making: Antithetical or Complementary? How do you answer that question? I welcome now your ideas about this subject: comments, questions, experiences that you have had in applying scholarship and experience to policy matters. Let's talk.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bogenschneider, Karen and Thomas J. Corbett. *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Insights from Policy-Minded Researchers and Research-Minded Policymakers*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2010. Print.
- Drury, Darrel. "The Professionalization of Teaching: What NEA Surveys Tell Us About a Common Knowledge Base." *Education Week*. 30 June 2011. Web. 10 July 2011.
- Nelson, Steven R., James C. Leffler, and Barbara A. Hansen. (2009). *Toward a Research Agenda for Understanding and Improving the Use of Research Evidence*. Portland: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. 2009. Web. 10 July 2011.
- Trimbur, John. *Solidarity or Service: Composition & the Problem of Expertise*. Portsmouth: Heinemann Boynton/Cook, 2011. Print.

#### Other Useful Sources

- Farley, Frank. "From the Heart." *American Psychologist* 51.8 (1996): 772-776. Print.
- Gurke, Deb, Robert Asen, Pam Conners, Ryan Solomon, and Elsa Gumm. "The Right Call: How and When Should You Use Research to Influence and Enhance Your Decisions?" *American School Board Journal* (March 2011). Print.

