

How To Be More of a Public Intellectual by Making Your Intellectual Work More Public

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I have but one small part of an answer to offer on the deep and difficult question, *What conditions are necessary to create a coherent democratic community that nurtures curriculum leaders as public intellectuals?* On top of that, the answer that I have in mind is unlikely to support the *coherence* of that democratic community. (Although if a community were entirely coherent, one wonders how interesting or educational would such a democracy be)

My work over the last eight years has been directed at improving one small aspect of this often incoherent democratic community in ways that speak to the role of curriculum leaders as public intellectuals. I am looking at ways of using the Internet to provide open and public access to the entire body of research and scholarship in education and other fields of academic inquiry. Access to knowledge has always been one of the driving forces of education, and certainly this right of access to knowledge informed both the public library and public school movements of the nineteenth century, at least in their most idealistic moments. It is a human right no less fundamental to the democratic quality of the community, as Thomas Jefferson was at pains to point out on more than one occasion.

In my own case, while publishing my scholarly work in academic journals, I had vainly dabbled in being a public intellectual, with a couple of pieces in the *New Statesman*, a handful of radio appearances, and a public talk or two at the local art gallery. I gradually came to realize a few years ago, with the introduction of new publishing technologies, that as educational researchers we might make a far greater intellectual contribution to the community at large by making public what we do best. What if this democratic community simply had far better access to the entire body of research on those questions that were affecting their democratic and daily lives, from the schooling of their children to the quality of air in their community? Was there some reason that providing the public with this access was not a good idea, even as it seemed to be part of a human right to know what had been learned, often at public expense?

Well, I have to admit that a decade ago, I would have said, yes, there is a reason not to bother making this scholarly work public. For as hard as we try to improve the curriculum and pedagogy in the schools, I would have thought back then, the vast majority of the public are simply not able to read this material, even if they happened to have some interest in it. And over the course of the last ten years, I have been proven dead wrong day after day.

After all, the public's uptake of life sciences research has changed the practice of medicine, according to the Pew Foundation, leading to what some physicians are calling "shared decision-making" with their patients (rather than, say, "patients intimidating doctors with research printouts"). Here, then, was an notable increase in the democratic quotient of people's lives based on access to research. Now, of course, not all of the information online is reliable, and people often misunderstand and misapply it, leading at times to important educational moments with physicians.

Yet the problem here is not the ignorance of a public unable to discern the wheat from the chaff. At this point, 80-85 percent of the wheat is locked up in research libraries; while only 15-20% of it is being made freely available or “open access” to the public online. The problem at this point is the scholarly community itself. It has yet to do enough to ensure that the knowledge which they work so hard to produce, as a public good, is made as widely available and as fully accessible as it could be. We are in a position to make this knowledge widely available online, while continuing to protect the quality of this knowledge by submitting it to rigorously peer-reviewed journals and by otherwise concentrating on honing their scholarly craft (rather than seeking to develop a second body of work for media outlets).

There are currently two readily available methods for educational researchers to greatly increase their contribution to the democratic quality of the community, two ways to make public their intellectual work as curriculum leaders. At this point, 93 percent of journals (in a sample of 8,685 titles, surveyed by the SHERPA project in the UK) permit authors to post a copy of their published article in an “open access” institutional repository (typically run by the author’s university library) or on the author’s own website. Yes, if you publish in an AERA, Sage, or Blackwell journal, you are able to make your article public. In principle, 93 percent of the literature in all fields could be made open access by its authors taking a few moments to self-archive their work on the Web.

The second path to increasing public access is to publish in an “open access” journal. Tirupalavanam G. Ganesh maintains an AERA list (<http://aera-cr.asu.edu/ejournals/>) of what is now over 190 “open access” education journals that make their contents freely available to the public and scholars around the world (some using the free software that we have developed to support open access journals; see <http://pkp.ubc.ca>). As if providing such access was not reason enough to do it, the research on what happens to work that is made open access reveals that such work is cited 50 to 250% more often than comparable work that the authors have not bothered to make open access, depending on the field (with education showing a 77 percent open access increase; see <http://opcit.eprints.org/oacitation-biblio.html>).

By making their work public in this way, education researchers are aiding and abetting not only their own standing as *public* intellectuals, but as well, the intellectual potential of curriculum leaders in schools and communities, as they are able to draw on, as well as challenge, this work through their leadership. Having access to this work, when critical issues arise in a community, will not assure greater coherence, as the world of scholarship represents a diverse range of positions and approaches to any given question in education. It may, however, increase the level of deliberation. (As for the public comprehension and evaluation question, we are currently developing a series of reading tools so that readers, coming across a study of interest, can readily consult related studies, forums, media articles, government policies, and other resource.)

Education scholars are now in a position to help communities realize their right to know, to draw on this body of research to bolster their cases, question policies, appreciate the complexities and consequences of issues, and grasp the many questions that remained un-answered in education. Making their work public is one ready way, within the reach of every faculty member, to greatly increase their contributions to the democratic and educational quality of the communities they profess to serve.