



Leveraging Education Research in a “Post-Truth” Era: Multimodal Narratives to Democratize Evidence

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“Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it.”

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, p. 350)

“... A persistent propaganda campaign had been spread as slave labor began to increase in value, to prove by science and religion that black men were not real men; that they were a sub-species fit only for slavery.”

W. E. B. Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace* (1952, p. 128)

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year was *post-truth*, defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Indeed, we see daily examples of policy issues—from climate change to immigration—in which appeals by powerful leaders to personal beliefs and emotions hold more sway than objective facts and evidence. And while Du Bois reminds us that “evidence” has also served racist agendas under the guise of objectivity, in the current political context, lies and misinformation coupled with what Arendt calls “contempt for facts” by powerful leaders regularly incite fear, hatred, and White supremacist protests, such as the one in Charlottesville, VA, in August 2017.

Juxtaposed, Arendt and Du Bois teach us that research evidence can be *either* used or rejected by those who seek to maintain a racial hierarchy in their quest for power. The question for education researchers is how, in a so-called “post-truth” political era when evidence is shunted and emotion is exploited, can we make our research matter to lessen inequality and increase educational opportunities? How do we have an impact when our most conscientious methodology—measuring, understanding, and communicating material and experiential “realities”—is increasingly discredited by those who construct alternate truths to serve their agendas? Furthermore, how can our findings speak to and of emotions such as fear and anxiety, which are regularly scapegoated onto the most marginalized individuals rather than attributed to their economic and social causes?

To make matters worse, at the same time that research is growing ever more marginalized, the interdisciplinary knowledge base of the field of education has been undermined by special interests bent on teacher-proofing pedagogy, fast-tracking professional preparation, and disregarding powerful evidence on child development in the quest for “data driven” results. In fact, some argue that we are transitioning from a society of facts and evidence to a society of unsystematically collected data, as smartphones, social media, and e-commerce make us all producers of “big data” that is mined to chart behavior patterns, especially those related to consumption and political leanings. In this context, systematic research that asks hard questions about how things came to be the way they are and why inequality persists can be dismissed as a remnant of Modernity. Education researchers are, therefore, experiencing the double bind of a disrespected craft in a disrespected field.

What we must do: Push back against the post-truth paradigm by demonstrating, with all the skill and energy we can muster, the value of our inquiry and the knowledge we generate—be it in the form of linear equations; deep, rich ethnographies; or Youth Participatory Action Research. *We must mobilize interdisciplinary and mixed-method bodies of evidence that coalesce to tell powerful, empirically driven, and multimodal narratives connecting the findings of advanced statistics to the lived experiences of educators, students, and parents across multiple contexts.*

This does not mean we will all conduct mixed-methods research, but it does require us to move beyond our disconnected individual research projects, beyond our often siloed AERA divisions and SIGs, to bring our findings into conversation with those of other studies to generate data-rich, multimodal narratives or stories of key findings on specific issues, such as assessment, campus climate, or integration. These compelling narratives, or the stories of our evidence, should be expressed through multiple modalities, including text, speech, and video and audio representation. Such multimodality will enable us to connect with different audiences, from PTAs to Capitol Hill, seeking reality-based research that explains the complex struggles in our field and provides hope for those denied the right to a meaningful and culturally sustaining education.

These cross-boundary collaborations do not imply that we should ignore the methodological, disciplinary, and epistemological disagreements in our field. They signify our different understandings of whose truth matters, what warrants reliable evidence, and whether or not objectivity exists. These differences are significant, and, hopefully, they force each of us to think more deeply about our research. But at this moment in history, we must also work together across some of these divides to learn from each other and bring comprehensive, systematic evidence to bear on critical issues in educational policy and practice.

Why should we work collaboratively across our boundaries to develop multimodal narratives of many studies instead of just promoting our own work, one study at a time? Research has demonstrated that discrete and disconnected facts alone will not sway people’s opinions. Indeed, the research evidence must be framed in more compelling ways that bring facts and findings to bear on people’s emotions and personal beliefs about fairness and equal opportunities. Otherwise, we know from recent history that these emotions and beliefs will be swayed by the fabricated facts of powerful leaders whose interests may or may not reflect democratic principles.

Therefore, we must make new connections across our often fragmented and disconnected findings, and we must learn from each other the possibility of different epistemological and

methodological approaches speaking to each other to address the most compelling policy and practice issues of our time. We need to reimagine education research, given our “post-truth” context, as the sum of our parts. Our impact depends on multimodal meta-analyses that are empowering and inclusive and that provide evidence-based narratives that speak to the frustration of millions of people denied their educational rights. Spoken in a clear, compelling, and multilingual manner, our evidence-based narratives can empower a populist movement of a new kind—one that demands a caring, supportive, and challenging education from early childhood through adulthood as a basic human right.

The 2019 AERA Annual Meeting, based in the vibrant multicultural city of Toronto and in the country of Canada, known more for political cooperation than partisan squabbles, is an opportunity to assess the state of education research. It is also an opportunity to explore how our work can help overcome the challenges of our time by becoming more relevant to communities, practitioners, and policy makers who believe in democratic principles and the public schools that should sustain those principles.

Multiple *subthemes* can be derived from this year’s theme that connect with the research interests and agendas of many AERA members and others participating in our Annual Meeting. A few examples include:

1. The relationship between a “post-truth” politics and the exacerbation of racial, class, and gender inequality in education policy and practice from pre-K through higher education.
2. Strategies to address the marginalization of the empirical research and knowledge of our field to ensure that it informs the development of professionals and their practice.
3. The relationship between the measures used to evaluate students, educators, schools, universities and workforce development in a standardized-test-driven system and the evidence on developmental psychology, culturally relevant ways of knowing, and the racial hierarchy that too often defines our field.

Presidential Sessions

The president and program co-chairs design 28 Presidential sessions aligned with their selected theme. They encourage those who have a session they wish to be considered for a Presidential session to submit proposals consisting of a brief—2- to 3-paragraph—description of the session, including the title, proposed session format, and a list of the participants, directly to president@aera.net.

Proposed Presidential sessions will be selected based on their connection to the theme, and thus their ability to foster collaboration between scholars (or between scholars and journalists, practitioners, policy makers, students, artists, etc.) who have rarely if ever collaborated before and who come from different disciplinary perspectives and/or methodological approaches but examine similar or related issues/topics in our field. The selected sessions will be those that integrate formerly disconnected work and help derive more compelling, evidence-based, and multimodal narratives that will touch the hearts and minds of millions of educators, parents, and/or policy makers.

Examples of session topics that relate to the theme and subtheme and may require cross-unit collaboration within AERA include:

1. Whose interests have been served by the last few decades of privatization and assessment-driven teaching in our field?

2. What do we know about the psychological and sociological impact of these reforms?
3. Whose knowledge is not valued in our narrow measures of ability, and what is the impact on children?
4. What are the individual and societal outcomes of our increasingly segregated and unequal educational system?
5. Why has research had such a limited impact on policies that define teacher preparation and teaching and learning in our schools?