

Bridging the practitioner and scholar divide

Shauna Mahajan

June 22, 2016

Background

The theories, concepts and methodologies central to the STEPS Centre's work are essential to understanding how we can achieve pathways to sustainability grounded in social justice. Despite this, in 'practice' there are numerous boundaries that prevent such useful tools and approaches from serving this purpose, that range from the simple lack of time for reflection and exploring alternative ways of thinking about problems and solutions, to the difficult power and politics that exist within and between organizations working on solutions for the environmental and social challenges of our time. Despite these boundaries, there still exists is great potential for incorporating the STEPS approach in practitioner settings that will require efforts from both practitioners and researchers to bridge the divide. Practitioners in this context can refer to anyone trying to influence change in different settings, from activists pushing the boundaries from the outside, or people working within large organizations or governments trying to make changes to systems from within.

Given my personal experience working with a large non-governmental organization, and recent shift from academia, I have been increasingly interested in finding ways critical social science reflection can promote the space for reflection and awareness stimulating shift in attitudes within larger organizations. This led to the discussion group during the final session of the STEPS summer school focused on effective ways of embedding more reflexive approaches in practitioner settings, as well as ways for communicating the complexities and insights one can gain from the STEPS approach. The discussion that resulted, paired with insights throughout the course provided a series of insights relevant for bridging the academic/practitioner divide, including the challenges involved in taking the STEPS approach in outside of academia, ideas for overcoming these challenges, as well as fundamental questions at the heart of the divide. This report addresses the

This is one of a series of reports on the relationship between research and activism, produced following the ESRC STEPS Centre Summer School 2016. It informs and is part of a web-based resource on research-activist links. We are grateful to the [Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l'Homme \(FPH\)](#) for their support of this initiative.

Visit the website: learning.steps-centre.org

conversations that occurred during the final session, and also synthesizes reflections from the course in general on the practitioner/academic interface.

The report is divided as follows:

- Challenges involved with applying the STEPS approach in 'practice' settings
- Reflections on solutions for overcoming such challenges
- External resources that operate in this 'middle ground'
- Other initiatives and networks to keep an eye on
- Emergent questions for reflection
- What now? From a 'practitioner' seat, what can academics do to help bridge the divide?

Challenges involved with applying the STEPS approach in practice settings

Discussions and reflections highlighted the number of challenges that can arise when trying to bring the STEPS approach into an applied setting. Highlighted especially during the STEPS conference and the "Translating STEPS" activity were issues around the terminology and language used to communicate the concepts and ideas fundamental to STEPS research. The simple words themselves posed problems across languages, with words such as 'reflexive' and 'normative perspective' flagged as difficult to understand and translate in some languages. During the conference, there was discussion on why we need to use particular words instead of other simpler phrases, which prompted the debate around sacrificing true meaning of words for the sake of simplicity, and the consequential miscommunication that could arise. This debate around use of words is vital as research shifts to being more interdisciplinary, and operating in transdisciplinary settings. Different disciplines in academia, and different sectors within the practitioner space, have developed terms, concepts, and acronyms that describe core concepts reflective of the different values of different approaches. Often times, even moving between different interdisciplinary environments is challenging, as many interdisciplinary settings developed entirely new sets of concepts and terms to honor new ideas that bridge old boundaries. While there is a recognized need for new terms and concepts in certain settings, if we are going to be successful at being inclusive across different disciplines and sectors, we need to be more comfortable with speaking up when words don't make sense, or making the time to clarify different meanings and perceptions on different concepts.

Another notable challenge involved with incorporating the STEPS approach into applied settings is the nature of bringing a critical social science perspective into a politicized practitioner setting. The STEPS approach highlights well the role

of politics and power around knowledge production, and consequently it is natural that challenges emerge when applying the STEPS framework in a political setting. As an example, embedded in the STEPS approach is highlighting the politics that surround the production of knowledge. Voicing concerns over the politics of knowledge can be incredibly challenging where scientific knowledge is already engaged in political struggle. It could be argued that addressing the politics, and often the subjectivity, of particular disciplines, could further undermine the 'credibility' of knowledge production through science, providing fuel to those who may not see the merit in longer scientific processes already, and wish to push certain agendas forward.

Reflections on solutions for overcoming such challenges

Despite the many challenges, STEPS summer school participants had a number of ideas on how to encourage the reflexive space that can help bring elements of the STEPS approach to a practitioner setting. The following ideas were suggested as tangible ways to promote "opening up" in settings and environments that tends towards "closing down."

- ***Form "Science/social science" communities of practice.*** Creating a structure that promotes open space and discussion is an essential first step for providing the regular structure for opening up. In my personal experience coordinating such a network at my organization, developing a typology of meetings that can be flexible enough to allow for the well-needed creative space for critical reflection, while also providing structure and clear purpose, has been incredibly valuable. We are able to intersperse more open space for discussion and reflection with more traditional lectures and debates, and be flexible to account for busy schedules and different needs that arise within an implementing organization.
- ***Create regular reflexive writing sessions, or reading sessions.*** A suggestion emerged in the discussion that creating a dedicated time and place for creative thinking, reading or writing will build a culture of more reflexive thinking and action. While many people have the good intention of creating time for more creative/reflexive reading or writing, often it doesn't happen during the work day unless it is built into your calendar. A group could read the same paper or report, or the time could just be used for dedicated reading and reflection on whatever topic is more important to individuals at the time.
- ***Use metaphors to communicate complex concepts.*** As language was described as one of the key challenges for bringing the STEPS approach outside the academy doors, the group had a lengthy discussion the different

ways to tackle this challenge. Some suggestions included metaphors (the example given during the conference of ‘everyone’s own pathway to creating different variations of soup’), as well as the use of examples relevant to the intended audience, or easy to understand. For example, when speaking about ecological resilience, often times the example of a coral reef is given because ‘alternative stable states’ are very easy to grasp using the visual depiction of a healthy reef and a bleached reef. Since leaving the STEPS summer school, I have found the example of seeds (local seed diversity versus genetically modified) as example easy to simplify and communicate quickly, highlighting alternative pathways to climate resilience, and discussing the politics of knowledge.

External resources that operate in the ‘middle ground’ between science and practice

Below is a list of resources that emerge during discussions as useful examples, or supplementary toolkits, that would be useful to keep in mind when designing the STEPS new website.

- ***Human Centered Design from IDEO***
A toolkit designed by IDEO, a San Francisco based design firm, for action research, that features many participatory research methods that overlap with STEPS approaches (including Photovoice).
<http://www.designkit.org/human-centered-design>
For further information, ask Shauna
- ***Specific to photovoice, PhotoVoice the charity, based in London.***
www.PhotoVoice.org – offers trainings in the photovoice methodology- could be interesting templates for other types of participatory action methods trainings
- ***Teaching Case Studies at JPAL***
A useful way of presenting a complex materials online through teaching videos: <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/research-resources/teaching>
For further information, ask Katarina
- ***Stockholm Resilience Centre’s “Applying Resilience” series***
The Stockholm Resilience Centre has a number of video vignettes that communicate some of the concepts core to the resilience approach, and also highlights particular ongoing research initiative and projects.
<http://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2015-02-19-applying-resilience-thinking.html>
- ***MOOCS***

Building a “Massive Open Online Course.” – A useful way to engage a much wider audience on core concepts in the STEPS approach

Other initiatives to keep an eye on

- The conservation sector’s concept of “**Boundary Science.**” A group of conservation scientists have been advocating the use of the term ‘boundary science’ – reflecting science that is useful for conservation decision making. This could be a ripe space for bringing in the pathways approach.

<http://luchoffmanninstitute.org/our-expertise/aligning-scientific-research-with-conservation-and-decision-making/>

See also: [Cook, C.N. et al.](#) 2013. “Achieving Conservation Science that Bridges the Knowledge–Action Boundary” *Conservation Biology*, 27:4, 669-678.

- A group of young scientists in Canada developed a website called “**Useful Science**” that aims to summarize scientific findings from across disciplines in a way that is easy to digest. An interesting initiative to keep track of, and explore synergies with applied sustainability science
<http://www.usefulscience.org/>

Emergent questions for reflection

While discussions prompted many ideas for possible solution, a number of questions still exist on bridging the academic and practitioner divide

- How can we deal with addressing politics of knowledge when the media can take such liberty in blowing up “bad science” – consequently influencing decision making? Would addressing the politics and subjective nature of knowledge and science further weaken the position of science in a political setting?
- How do we adapt the terminology we use to communicate complex social science concepts without losing meaning?
- How do we influence the incentive system in academic to provide the space necessary for bridging the practitioner/science divide?

What now? What can academics do to help bridge the divide?

- **Dissemination of research.** While social media and blogging are great ways to start disseminating science, other forms of communicating knowledge in a way that has direct relevance to policy and practice do exist. The communication of research results is not a simple task, as there are

numerous audiences that need to be taken into account. Explore new ways of disseminating research must become embedded in academic institutions, perhaps even as a deliverable in grants, and not just something students/researchers do in their spare time. Considering the number of audiences that should be on the receiving end of research results (e.g. local communities often the subject of research; local governments; international governments; international and local NGOs), the forms disseminated research should take will naturally vary for different needs. Understanding what these possible forms are, and creating the time in space for creating disseminated products and communicating them is a crucial step often absent in the academic space.

- **Teach research dissemination.** In my research education so far, despite knowing there are many ways to communicate research, I rarely have engaged in formal discussion or debate on ways to communicate research. Building on the prior point, if dissemination of research in a way that can influence policy and practice becomes more central to research institutions, this process could be better incorporated into research education.
- **Build an online presence.** A meaningful way to engage in the research/action space is engaging in policy forums and dialogues as an invited speaker. As an anecdote from my own experience planning a science/practice conference, the only way we can get a sense of potential speakers is through online videos, interviews, and other media widely accessible. We use videos to judge whether a not a speaker can not only speak well, but also engage in effective dialogue with policy and practice. And it is often the case that we only have a short period of time to devote to finding the right people, consequently miss out on lots of interesting potential candidates. As a result, building an online presence that reflects individual academics, and institutes, current research and views will help organizations trying to bring together science and practice better understand what is out there.
- **Reflect on language.** Given that language was highlighted as one of the fundamental challenges of translating the STEPS approach, providing the forum for different disciplines and sectors to reflect on what language makes sense would be incredibly valuable. Discussions during the Summer School started this conversation, especially given the diversity of backgrounds in the room, and diversity of languages represented. Building out this discussion further will be critical for determining what language and modes of communication make the most sense in different forums.
- **Co-create research questions with practitioners.** Academics have always played a significant role in 'exploring the unexplored' – but there are

significant science needs that NGOs/other organizations do not have the capacity to address. If academics and practitioners could come together more often to help identify the pressing research challenges that can have a direct influence on policy, the forum for bringing the critical reflection offered by the social sciences including the STEPS approach will naturally be formed. For example, for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, academics can play a critical 'non-biased' role in helping organizations better learn from the successes and failures of different interventions. From personal experience, the culture in the US in the conservation and development sectors is shifting more to 'evidenced-based' decision making, providing a window of opportunity to better forge partnerships between academics and practitioners.

- **Engage more with journalists.** Building off the threads of science communication, engaging more directly with journalists may help address some of the challenges raised about 'over-representing bad science' and providing new forums for communications. While many times working with journalists and communications can be difficult and time consuming, it will be critical to ensure that a more public forum exists for communicating
- **Production of open-source materials.** While exploring alternative means for dissemination, also publishing open-source research results and technical reports will allow for research to disseminate faster, and be more accessible to a wider audience.

Specific ideas for the STEPS website

- **A strong focus on methods.** Many of the discussion group participants emphasized the fact they wanted to learn how to do sustainability research in a way that is socially just, reflecting the theoretical approach of STEPS. As such, having a space on the website that clearly outlines the promises, pitfalls, and clear practical steps involved with choosing and implementing different participatory research methods would be an invaluable resource for both past summer school participants, and those who may not be able to attend. There was a particular emphasis in the group discussion on **multi-criteria mapping** as a particular method of interest.
- **Interactive games.** Given the complex nature of much of the material and concepts we covered in the STEPS summer school, sharing some material through interactive games was suggested as an engaging way to teach and communicate some of the more complex concepts.
- **Online discussion forum.** The use of participatory research methods is rarely straightforward, and many lessons are often learned during the

process of implementing a method. Providing a forum where those interested in participatory research methods to share lessons learned, and ask questions about use of methods would be incredibly valuable. For example in my work, when I come across a particular question or challenge, I will often turn to the social science working group of the Society for Conservation Biology to ask a question about, for example, survey design or statistical analysis. As the application of participatory research methods that seek to empower research participants in sustainability science is still relatively new, providing a forum for people to interact and discuss would be very useful.

Conclusion

Despite the many challenges, there are plenty of forums that STEPS research can continue to permeate the practitioner setting, and bridge the divide. There are a number of practical steps that can occur on both sides that can help bring more critical perspectives into practice, and I strongly believe with more and more young interdisciplinary scholars from academia who are both interested in research and driving change, new avenues will continue to emerge, permitting a shift in our institutions and incentive to match this new generation of activist scholars.