



Research–Practice Partnerships for Public Engagement with Science

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What is the issue?

Public engagement with science (PES) involves intentional and meaningful interactions between scientists and publics that, over time, foster mutual understanding, knowledge exchange, and trust [1]. PES researchers contribute theory and evidence about these interactions and their impacts. PES practitioners contribute innovations in the design and development of PES activities and practical insights about what works and why.

However, these two communities do not always align. PES researchers express frustration that the PES literature is not informing the development of PES activities and PES practitioners express frustration that PES research is not useful to their work. One way to address this challenge is through research-practice partnerships (RPPs). RPPs are long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners for tackling problems of practice and improving both the relevance of research and the translation of evidence into decision-making [2]. This practice brief outlines a set of insights gleaned from three ongoing RPPs focused on PES [3].

Things to Consider

RPPs require crossing the boundaries of professional cultures and norms. These boundaries in PES may be more permeable than other fields given that many PES practitioners were originally trained as natural scientists. This sets the stage for shared scientific values with PES researchers, such as familiarity and interest in multiple forms of data and valuing the development of publications and conference presentations.

Successful RPPs evolve over time. RPPs begin with a commitment to positive relationships with respect, humility, and curiosity as partners learn about each other's work and perspectives [4]. This work takes *time*. In one example RPP, the researcher spent a full year building an initial

understanding of the project. Following the learning phase, successful RPPs transition into co-design: an iterative process of developing and testing questions and strategies together to address a common focus of study.

RPPs also provide a context for practitioners and researchers to interact as *thinking partners* in PES. This role goes beyond the joint work that initially defines the collaboration. Over time, thinking partners engage in regular interactions, beyond their project work, to apply knowledge and expertise across partnership boundaries. This involves researchers suggesting concepts, models, and theories relevant to emerging PES design decisions, and practitioners opening opportunities to groundtruth the relevance of research questions, help interpret observations, and identify knowledge gaps.

Attending to Equity

Successful RPPs are reciprocal: researchers and practitioners each contribute to and benefit from the partnership. In PES, these partnerships are likely easier for professionals with privileged positions: for example, practitioners who have the support of grants or other sources that allow for time spent on scholarship, and senior researchers who have tenure or other institutional supports that allow for exploratory projects. Other models like peer-review meetings for PES programs and the development of research and practice briefs may open opportunities for thought partnership in PES beyond these privileged positions.

Why this Matters

Advancing PES requires spanning the boundaries of PES practice, evaluation, and research. PES researchers and practitioners might consider whether there are already collaborators in their networks who can be supported as thinking partners across these boundaries, and if there are accessible opportunities, such as project meetings, conferences, or joint publications, to initiate these relationships.

Learn More

This brief summarizes the key ideas of Peterman et al. [3]. More information about RPPs and PES can be found on InformalScience.org and the products of the Research + Practice Collaboratory.

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References

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