2014 keynote address: Spread and scale in the digital age

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Cynthia Coburn's keynote address for the 2014 International SIM Conference in July delved deeply into spread and scale, two concepts close to the professional hearts of SIM Network members.

Coburn, professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, has conducted research on spread and scale for almost 20 years. She distinguishes between the two concepts as follows:

- *Spread* is the process by which tools, practices, or programs move to greater numbers of people, organizations, or communities.
- *Scale* is the outcome or goal of spread.

"I have found that distinction to be pretty useful," she said. "The main argument I'm going to make is that the strategies that one should use to spread an innovative program depends on what you're trying to spread, who you're trying to reach, the conditions in the places where those people live and work, and how you conceptualize scale."

Coburn refutes the common conception that scaling up is a generic process that applies in all cases and to all manner of innovations.

"Actually, that's not right at all," she said. "There are some pretty different strategies depending on the nature of what it is you're trying to spread and scale."

KINDS OF INNOVATIONS

The different kinds of innovations she identified during her talk, and the challenges associated with them, likely are familiar to SIM Professional Developers: ideas, tools, practices, models, and identities.

Ideas—principles, plans, or concepts—are relatively easy to spread, she said. The downside is that they tend to lose meaning when spread widely.

"People can also embrace ideas without changing their practice," she said. "When this happens, there's not much impact on work with kids."

Cynthia Coburn

Ideas spread more effectively, she said, when they have explicit, direct connections to the teacher's work.

"It's very hard for people to enact something without having tools or much more concrete representations about what does this mean in my classroom and with kids," she said.

School districts have a long history of embracing new *tools*, everything from curriculum guides to assessments to instructional games. The challenge with tools, she said, is that individuals have a strong tendency to use new tools in ways that simply reproduce their existing practices.

Shifting *practices* requires favorable conditions within the school or district, including supportive administrators and policies.

"This is really what most people are trying to influence: What teachers do in their work, the way they're engaging with kids in the classroom, the way leaders are doing different things to support teachers," Coburn said.

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And, as SIM Professional Developers know, shifting practices is hard.

"It's much more challenging than getting a tool out there or getting an idea out there," she said. "It's more challenging to encourage teachers to move to new practices or to spread new practices. The further they depart from existing practice, the more that they require individuals to develop new knowledge, skills, and professional identities."

Models may consist of combinations of tools, ideas, and practices. They can provide a strong scaffold to help teachers shift practices, but complex models require an investment in capacity building to be successful. For very complex models, the infrastructure necessary to support capacity building gets large and expensive. In addition, the more specified the model, the less likely it is to meet the needs of diverse schools. Both conditions limit spread.

Identities, or people's conceptions of who they are and how they relate to others, spread best through social interaction and through participation in new activities and approaches.

Though initially skeptical of the role of identity in spread and scale, Coburn has come to believe identity is crucial to the process of adopting new ideas and practices.

"Teachers and others are not likely to take on new practices if it doesn't square with their sense of who they are as a person or who they are as a professional," she said.

WHO ARE YOU TRYING TO REACH?

"Understanding what knowledge and skills people have and the degree that it varies within a school or within a district is important in thinking about what kind of supports they will need to take on new ideas, approaches, and practices," Coburn said.

Identity and professional norms play an important role in whether people are willing to try something new. If teachers do not perceive an innovation—data-based decision making, for example—as part of their role in the classroom, they are less likely to be open to the idea.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

School context is extremely important to the spread of innovations among teachers. All of these factors make a big difference in the spread of ideas and practices: teachers are among colleagues as they try to take on new practices; teachers have supportive leadership and adequate resources; parents and other stakeholders are on board; and policies are aligned to support the new practice.

CONCEPTUALIZING SCALE

"People conceptualize scale in quite different ways," said Coburn. "They use the same term, but they're talking about different things."

Scale can be thought of in terms of adoption, replication, adaptation, or reinvention.

With *adoption*, the goal is for people or organizations to embrace ideas, tools, practices, or identities widely. This kind of scale often counts success in terms of number of sales, hits, downloads, or program participation.

"There's less concern with what people are doing with the tools and the materials, how they're using the ideas, how they are participating," she said. "The goal is to get stuff out and to build a community or constituency for this work, which in turn fosters even greater spread."

A second way of conceptualizing scale, *replication*, aims to reach a lot of people and organizations in such a way that they use the innovation with fidelity.

"Depending upon the complexity of the model or tool, the replication approach is never going to spread as widely as adoption and some other approaches," Coburn said. "It usually requires a lot of support to engage with ideas deeply."

With *adaptation*, a third way to think about scale, the expectation is that people will adapt models, tools, or practices in response to their local context and their own experimentation.

"Adaptation must keep true to core principles and practices, which of course requires people to understand them quite well," she said.

With adaptation, innovations might look very different in classrooms, but teachers are expected to adhere to the underlying principles of the approach.

A final way to think about scale is *reinvention*.

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"I see this more in out-of-school environments than I do in within-school environments," Coburn said. However, along with the increase of digital technology in school comes an "ethos of reinventing," she said, in which people use ideas, tools, and practices and recombine them in innovative ways.

Reinvention is less concerned with keeping true to the core principles of an idea or practice, but the approach has the potential to spread widely.

In her research, Coburn saw reinvention practices in which programs learned from experimenting and incorporated what they learned into future versions of their program.

STRATEGIES FOR SPREAD AND SCALE

Coburn described "families" of strategies that people use, sometimes in combination, when trying to spread an idea, tool, practice, or other innovation. *Communication* strategies, for example, can help spread ideas and raise the profile of the work.

"The more people take on a set of new approaches, the more they're seen as legitimate," she said. "You get these ideas out, they become seen as good ideas, good approaches, and that then encourages more people to take them on."

Another family of strategies—*capacity building*, a concept SIM Professional Developers are very familiar with—includes online learning opportunities, face-to-face professional development, coaching, and leadership development.

Capacity building is especially important when spreading practices, she said. Because new practices can be challenging, especially if they are complex or require teachers to significantly change the way they teach, teachers need a lot of support as they develop knowledge about the practice.

A third family of strategies, *participation* strategies, include social networks, conferences, web-based communities, and teacher professional communities.

"Participation strategies get people involved with ideas," Coburn said. "They give people opportunities to learn about and practice using new tools and practices, but one of the things that's very important is that they're very effective for shifting identities."

Policy strategies—advocacy, opinion pieces, blog posts, public meetings, meetings with policymakers—are crucial because policies play a powerful role, both in constraining the spread of new practices and in enabling spread and scale.

"Paying attention to policy is a crucial, but often unacknowledged, strategy in the toolbox for spread and scale," she said.

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http://bit.ly/1tsFN2L

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