

From the Editor...

Addressing Today's "Messes" With Engaged Systemic Approaches

Messy problems, wicked problems, ill-defined problems, complex problems, systemic problems . . . the long-standing call is for higher education to partner with communities to address such problems. But are prevailing forms of engaged scholarship capable of managing "messes," as defined by systems theorist Ackoff (1999): complex, dynamic systems of problems that interact and reinforce each other over time? McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck, and Fitzgerald, in their essay leading this issue of *JHEOE*, ask this question and posit that the lack of progress in effectively managing complex problems is due in part to the predominance of an isolated-impact approach (*Kania & Kramer, 2011*), in which engaged problem-solving addresses a particular problem, often through stand-alone projects, with possible strong outcomes for a target population but in ways that leave the larger system or context unchanged. They discuss and illustrate an alternative approach called systemic engagement in a case example, the Wiba Anung, a now 6-year partnership between Michigan State University, Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, Bay Mills Community College, and nine Michigan tribes focused on the complex problem of disparities between minority children and White children in early childhood education outcomes. Without denying that there are no comfortable ways to engage such complexity, the authors propose six key principles for systemic engagement, using the language of principles to provide foundational constructs for practice with a sense of permeability and liquidity.

In addition to messiness, the metaphor of liquidity is also helpful in effectively capturing the complexity of social changes taking place. In developing the metaphor, Nicolaidis (2015), another scholar who writes about decision making, problem solving, and organizational transformation under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty, says:

Increasingly, social structures widely viewed as solid—education, health, social security, leisure, and family, to name only a few—are more fluid, unable to hold their shape for long. This new liquidity signals constant change, and with it insecurity and uncertainty.... The transformation from solid to liquid modernity has created unprecedented contexts . . . confronting individuals

with a series of challenges never before encountered. Social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and therefore cannot serve as frames of reference for human learning, actions, and long-term planning, giving rise to ambiguity. The complexity of these liquid times requires individuals to make sense of their fragmented lives by being flexibly, adaptable and constantly ready and willing to change tactics; to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret; and to act in a moment, as failure to act brings greater insecurity. (*p. 2*)

It is within these liquid, complex contexts that “messes” are being addressed through courageous and innovative studies and programs. Morrell, Sorensen, and Howarth’s assessment indicated that the Charlotte Action Research Project model’s unique strength was its ability to make space for the exploration of wicked problems that have resulted from that city’s structural and sociospatial inequality because tangible issues identified by community partners become action research priorities for the community–university team. In “The Impact of Socially Engaged Theatre Across Communities: A Tale of Two Slave Cabins,” Harrison Long presents other fora—theatre and text—as venues for considering tough, messy problems and relates the powerful results.

Actors leading these efforts at bold systemic change are featured in several articles in this issue—as institutional leaders, research scientists, alumni, and graduate students. Liang and Sandmann report patterns of distributed leadership in Carnegie community engagement classified institutions. Amplifying research findings from other sectors, McCann, Cramer, and Taylor report in their study of university research scientists that younger, nontenured researchers tend to be more eager to involve themselves in education and outreach with a nonscientific audience than their older, tenured colleagues. Winston examines the relationship between five curricular and cocurricular undergraduate experiences and 10 types of political engagement after graduating to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of what facilitates the attitudinal and identity development that promotes enduring activism. Matthews, Karls, Doberneck, and Springer provide us examples of portfolio and certification programs in community engagement for graduate students. The curricula described and lessons learned from two universities can be helpful to other institutions attempting to start similar graduate-level professional development. In an overview of

his action research dissertation, Dillon serves as a model of a graduate student using his doctoral research to work collaboratively and reciprocally with alumni from a community-based leadership program to facilitate community conversations about their “messes.”

The books reviewed in this issue warrant particular attention. Andrew Pearl reviews David Cooper’s collection of well-written, provocative essays released over a span of 20 years. A volume that marries the themes discussed above is *Transforming Cities and Minds Through the Scholarship of Engagement*. In his review, Hartley highlights the collaboration of a faculty member, Lorlene Hoyt (editor of the volume), and a group of six graduate students affiliated with M.I.T.’s Community Innovator’s Lab (CoLab) who take on formidable urban challenges of economy, equity, and environment in ways that provide exceptional cases of systemic scholarly engagement. The CoLab students’ master’s theses are included as chapters in the book. In addition to presenting good practice, the cases are well analyzed. I was so taken by Hartley’s review and the makeup of the book, I purchased it!

In the review of *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*, Hustedde, himself a sociologist, introduces Schwartz and Sharpe’s work that explores the contemporary balancing of technical or instrumental-driven knowledge against phronesis, the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom, or values-driven knowledge. The use of practical wisdom in decision making is advocated as a countermeasure to the “psychic numbing and ethical erosion” currently taking place in the professions. Although the book focuses on the professions, Hustedde extends this perspective by raising application questions for other disciplines, for multidisciplinary and postdisciplinary academic coalitions, for higher education outreach and engagement, for cross-cutting initiatives of faculty and students, and, importantly, for exploring the practical wisdom emerging from communities.

We thank the authors, peer reviewers, and associate editors of articles in this issue for framing our thinking about community engagement deep in the exciting, complex liquid “messes” that we must confront in order to realize the full potential of our theories and practices. Their work is an inspiration for all of us who have made a commitment to address real-world problems in engaged systemic ways as scholars, students, practitioners, and community members.

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