Outreach as Scholarly Expression
A Faculty Perspective

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Abstract

The outreach and engagement movement of the 1990s has had a demonstrable impact on American higher education. Today, outreach is recognized as a legitimate form of scholarship on many campuses, and numerous colleges and universities are taking actions as "engaged institutions." In large measure, this progress is testimony to the vision, courage, and tenacity of executive-level academic leaders, including presidents, provosts, and deans. Faculty members play vital roles, too. One of those roles is to deepen our understanding of the work itself—the never-ending quest to comprehend outreach more completely and deeply. The purpose of this essay is to stimulate national dialogue about this domain, which we call *outreach as scholarly expression*. In this essay we explore several complexities associated with understanding outreach as scholarly expression; interpret contemporary perspectives on scholarship with outreach in mind; and discuss three areas we believe are fundamental to advancing outreach as scholarly expression.

The outreach and engagement movement has benefited significantly from higher education's exploration into the domain of scholarship, typified by Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered (1990)* and *Scholarship Assessed* by Charles Glassick and colleagues *(1997)*. There is an undeniable emphasis nationwide on recognizing and affirming outreach as a legitimate form of scholarship. Many executive administrators are aligning institutional obligations and practices with outreach and engagement in mind. Examples include reframing faculty reward processes and reorganizing undergraduate curricula around a service-learning theme.

These innovations are essential if we are to embrace Boyer's vision, expressed elegantly in "Creating the New American College" *(1994)*. However, achieving the vision requires more than affirming outreach as scholarship and more than adjusting collegiate systems to foster engagement. It also requires advancing our understanding of the work itself. We refer to this third domain as outreach as scholarly expression—the quest associated with understanding outreach more completely and deeply. In this essay we invite readers to join us in exploring outreach as scholarly expression.

Respecting Outreach as a Complex Phenomenon

Central to understanding outreach as scholarly expression is respecting it as a complex phenomenon. First, outreach is expressed in many ways, not in one way. For example, technical assistance outreach—practiced as the introduction of change in a recipient system—is profoundly different from outreach as participatory development where local people engage actively in determining their collective future. These are only two examples of multiple and distinct outreach forms that coexist in the academy. The various forms are often fundamentally different in epistemology (theory of knowledge), ontology (nature of reality), methodology (approach), axiology (values), and rhetoric (language) *(Guba and Lincoln 1994; Heron and Reason 1997).* Rhetorically, for example, *client* and *change agent* convey the spirit and essence of some outreach experiences, but not of others.

> "*. . . the very word outreach conveys a distinct epistemological, ontological, and axiological reference point.*"

Second, the very word *outreach* conveys a distinct epistemological, ontological, and axiological reference point. Reaching out is academy-centered (knowledge from) and unidirectional (to those who benefit). Other terms used in our field, such as *service* and *engagement*, are challenging for a different reason: the words have diffuse meaning and are open to multiple interpretations. Who is serving and engaging whom? Why? How? Under what circumstances? Toward what ends?

Outreach is complex for a third reason: it is designed and undertaken by a range of participants whose roles and relationships are contextually embedded. Sometimes academics conceive, organize, execute, and evaluate outreach independently. However, in many instances of intense collaboration, outreach is coauthored with partners in the field. Collaboration can take many forms, depending on how issues associated with power sharing, roles, and expectations are addressed by partners in context. Whatever its form, collaboration of any kind requires reconceptualizing traditional academic expectations and roles—those associated with the "academic as expert" model.

There is a fourth reason why outreach is complex. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish outreach from other identifiable forms of academic work. Consider this service-learning example. Students engage actively in community service and a faculty member connects

course material and experiences with students' fieldwork. The faculty member conducts research on the impact of the project on the community, publishing the findings in a peer-reviewed journal. Is this outreach or teaching or research? Perhaps it is best understood as a case of the "ands"—connecting outreach *and* teaching *and* research dynamically, creatively, and in reinforcing ways.

Why is it important to respect outreach as a complex phenomenon? Thinking this way has theoretical and practical value. First, it keeps us from embracing the notion that there is a definitive outreach expression or a best form for undertaking it. At issue is aligning the approach and form with the situation at hand. With an incredible array of problems, situations, settings, and challenges facing us in the outreach domain, it is impractical and even dangerous to endorse a "one size fits all" way of thinking. If there is anything that we have learned about outreach, it is that academics need to adjust posture and practice to the realities of the setting as they experience it. This requires approaching outreach as a form of inquiry. Second, viewing outreach as complex compels us to keep on the lookout for new expressions and forms, such as participatory action research *(Smith, Willms, and Johnson 1997).* Recently emerged and emerging forms represent innovative and sometimes radical expressions. As scholars, we must view them as opportunities to explore the frontiers of outreach theory and practice, not as exceptions to the norm or aberrations.

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Conceptions of Scholarship

One way of saying that outreach is complex is to conclude that the field is dynamic and evolving, not fixed. We see scholarship similarly. Although we owe a great deal to recent intellectual excursions into the domain of scholarship, we know that any scholarly contribution is made at a particular point in time and can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Boyer, for instance, invites us to conceive scholarship in multiple forms—as discovery, learning, engagement, and integration. However, one way of interpreting Boyer's contribution is to view each form

as different from the others in terms of the scholarly functions performed, roles undertaken, and activities completed. Viewing scholarship this way can lead to "rearranging the deck chairs"; that is, exchanging the traditional three legs of the academic mission—teaching, research, and service—for the four forms of scholarship.

We do not interpret Boyer's contribution that way. We view the four scholarly forms heuristically—as conceptualizations that help us better understand and appreciate the full range of scholarly expression. In accord with Gillespie's *(2001)* contention that language influences how we frame reality, we purposely choose to refer to scholarly work in outreach in terms of outreach *as scholarly expression* rather than *as the scholarship of outreach*. The *scholarship of outreach* conveys separateness—of outreach. *Outreach as scholarly expression* suggests a connection to something larger—to scholarship. As scholars, we put scholarship in the center, not outreach. Otherwise, we compartmentalize our work and we become teacher scholars, research scholars, and outreach-engagement scholars. What we do at any point in time and on any given day (e.g., teaching) is not really who we are (e.g., teachers). All we do connects thematically to a larger purpose: an overarching program of scholarship that is enriched by, but is not restricted to, a single scholarly domain. In fact, some of the most compelling experiences have involved connecting the domains—in effect, blurring the distinctions among discovery, learning, engagement, and integration.

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We also view Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff's contribution heuristically. We concur with the authors' description of the scholarly process—setting clear goals, being prepared adequately, selecting appropriate methods, obtaining meaningful outcomes and impacts, sharing the results with others, and engaging in reflective critique. But we do not believe the authors are saying that scholarship is *always* done that way or *should* be planned and executed that way.

We find it impossible to describe our compelling outreach experiences in a linear, phase-driven way. For example, more than once we have found ourselves in the middle of an outreach experience and in over our heads. We were unprepared, not because of

oversight, but because outreach is in reality a border crossing. We have found ourselves working in community contexts that were new to us, and with partners whose ways of knowing and operating were distinctly different from our own. We have been propelled beyond the realm of prior experience and stretched outside our comfort zone. In these situations, we gained knowledge and skills on the fly. For us, outreach is often fuzzy, messy, and unpredictable. At the same time, we cannot deny the truth: these experiences extend our reach, professionally and personally, changing the way we work, how we understand and act on societal issues, and how we view our professional raison d'être. If these experiences had been designed and undertaken with preplanned certainty, we doubt that they would have had such an impact.

Suggested Directions

We believe that advancing outreach as scholarly expression requires taking seriously the work of the late Donald Schon as expressed in such works as *Educating the Reflective Practitioner (1987)* and "Knowing-in-Action: The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology" *(1995)*. Schon's metaphoric treatment of the professional perched "on the high, hard ground" in contrast to the professional mired "in the swampy lowland" speaks loudly to us. Outreach as scholarly expression has to be understood for what it is—an excursion into the harsh realities of everyday life. What are the implications associated with viewing outreach this way? We discuss three here.

Discourse about Choice Making

A feature of the "swampy lowland" is explicit consideration of the choices we make—institutionally and individually—about the problems on which we work, the partners with whom we collaborate, the locations where we work, the approaches we take, and how we define outreach success. Sometimes these decisions are made straightforwardly, even strategically. They always reflect moral considerations of equity and social justice. For example, as you drive by your university's biotechnology park or down the street where your university is involved in an urban revitalization project, ask yourself, "In relationship to all the work that we might undertake, why are we doing *this* work?" At issue is not whether these choices are right or wrong. At issue is that *these* options were chosen from among a constellation of possible options.

Outreach choice making takes place in a complex environment. Pressures to respond or not respond emanate from both inside and outside the academy. These pressures come in multiple forms and often reflect competing values. Here are two examples:

- An untenured faculty member is urged by her department chairperson "to look out for herself" by producing a steady stream of outreach products. The faculty member decides to shy away from engaging in a difficult, long-term project—working with a community group that has virtually no prior experience in community organizing—in favor of partnering with an accomplished community group. In making this decision, the faculty member reasons she will be able to produce manuscripts and to achieve measurable outcomes more easily and rapidly.

- A dean at a public university receives a call from a powerful state legislator. The legislator urges the dean to get the faculty involved in an outreach project that the public official strongly supports—statewide land use planning. The dean knows that the legislator chairs the House budget committee.

In an era where emphasis in outreach is placed on "delivering the goods," we contend that the academy has to invest more time in examining, debating, and explicitly deciding what goods to deliver (or not), and to whom and why. If that is to happen, we must vigorously re-embrace a fundamental feature of scholarly culture—discourse. Boyer certainly did not lose sight of this. In the inaugural issue of this journal, he indicated that we need to create "a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously with each other, helping to enlarge what anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes as the universe of human discourse. . . ." *(1996, 20)*.

As Ulrich *(1988)*, among others, has argued, there is urgency about engaging in discourse; we need to explore openly our moral obligations and the ways in which we make choices around competing values. We live increasingly in a *risk society (Beck 1992)* where the processes of modernization are themselves contributing to a problematique *(Latour 1993)*. We see it in our families, schools, communities, and around the world, and it comes in multiple forms, such as chronic poverty, environmental challenges, and interpersonal conflict. Higher education has not caused these problems, but it

has an obligation to foster critical examination and debate around choices made in addressing them.

Responding to societal challenges often forces us to choose between hotly contested alternatives. Take, for example, the host of new technologies, such as genetically engineered crops. These technologies provide exceedingly powerful tools for achieving "good," but they also carry moral and other questions—and risks— associated with their development and application.

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As scholars, we must ask whether we are sponsoring (or at least participating in) "a universe of human discourse" as urged by Boyer, where matters and ways of addressing issues emerge. By this, we do not mean just hosting academy-sponsored seminars on major issues facing society. We do that all the time. We mean engaging in discourse that leads to greater understanding and enlightened response. We believe this is a matter of fundamental importance, and its pursuit is necessary to advance outreach as scholarly expression.

Dynamics in the Engagement Interface

According to Fullan *(1991)*, first-order change improves efficiency and effectiveness, and contributes to "doing things better." Second-order change, Fullan contends, alters the fundamental ways in which we do our work. Second-order change is not about doing things better; it is about "doing better things."

An incubator for second-order change in outreach is what we call the *engagement interface*—the setting where collaborators from the academy and society engage each other. The interface is a dynamic, evolving, and co-constructed space—a collaborative community of inquiry. What are some of the distinctive features of the engagement interface?

Joint construction of purposes. Communities of inquiry at the engagement interface typically emerge out of the need to respond to day-to-day challenges. For example, a classroom teacher may collaborate with a professor because she is concerned about ways she can work more effectively with parents in supporting children's learning in and out of school. Past efforts by this teacher

at increasing communication and providing resources to parents and their children have not proven very successful. If the current literature does not address this practitioner's day-to-day challenge, then inquiry in the engagement interface becomes a vehicle for discovering new approaches for addressing the practice problem, and possibly for other teachers who share similar professional challenges.

Developing shared norms. In the engagement interface, colleagues from the academy and the practice setting have the opportunity to construct shared norms of discourse and interaction. What emerges is often dialectical—between reflection and action, and between theory and practice. If cooperators are able to take advantage of their differences, they may produce more robust understanding and actions than would have been possible had they worked independently. We know from the literature that appreciating differences and working together to construct shared norms requires an atmosphere of mutual respect, honesty, and trust *(Bartunek and Louis 1996)* as well as an ethic of caring *(Noddings 1984)*. Risk taking and creativity often emerge when parties perceive that the engagement interface is a safe, supportive environment for interaction and discourse.

Bringing unique perspectives and skill to bear in practice. Practitioners "know" their context and the practice arena—they have local knowledge. Scholars often "know" in more generalized and theoretical ways that cut across context-specific experiences. Appreciating and embracing these different ways of knowing can lead to richer understanding and more informed practices. Colleagues from different settings are no longer merely insiders and outsiders. They are stakeholders working toward shared purposes who can accomplish more together than they might accomplish separately.

Engaging in the shared appraisal of outcomes. In the engagement interface, participants ask difficult questions about the outcomes of their work. These questions go beyond examining whether they have accomplished the practical work that they set out to do. They ask whether and how their work has created new insights, discoveries, ways of knowing, or ways of acting that can be shared with others. They also question whether and how their work really matters, to whom, and to what extent they have engaged in effecting real change that makes a difference in people's lives. Consider this example. A schoolteacher is considering using a newsletter to enhance parents' support of their children's learning. Working with academic colleagues

in the engagement interface stimulates her to question why she is considering this option. The teacher begins to explore other options and learns through home visitations that parents are more responsive to face-to-face interactions that help them learn concrete ways to work with their children at home. This leads her to hold a series of potluck family dinners at the local community center where parents and children read together, and parents exchange specific ideas with each other.

In summary, we see the engagement interface as a unifying frame of reference for scholarly work. It cuts across all professions and fields, pertains to all problem types and locations, and is relevant across time. Both "older hands" and outreach newcomers can learn important lessons by exchanging experiences about their work in the interface. That is why we view inquiry into this complex domain as a fundamental part of advancing outreach as scholarly expression.

Evolution as an Engaged Scholar

The engagement interface is a place where academics mature in their understanding of and appreciation for outreach as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. It is in this regard that *reflexivity* matters. Being reflexive means having the ability to study our work and ourselves in context, and in evolution, just as we would study a problem "out there." To be reflexive means focusing on the "in here"; that is, turning the investigative lens on self in critically recursive ways as though the self is "the other" *(Schratz and Walker 1995; Linde 1993)*. Doing that means seeking to better appreciate and understand our dynamic and evolving scholarly selves.

Recognizing the importance of being reflexive, a member of our learning community—a community psychologist—prepared this interpretation of her professional journey, which she titled "From Applied Research to Engaged Scholar."

> When I read Boyer's book on scholarship, I was excited about what it seemed to suggest about my work. As a tenure-track faculty member I was eager to have outreach count towards promotion and tenure. I now recognize that I defined scholarship narrowly. I focused on traditional academic outcomes, viewed my extensive engagement in the community as necessary for doing quality work, and interpreted my efforts to feed back results and recommendations as "service only." The significance of these processes—in terms of outreach as scholarly expression—was unclear to me.

As I reflected on what Boyer had to say and engaged in numerous discussions with colleagues, I realized that by focusing solely on making my research contextually valid and relevant, I ignored what was truly scholarly about what I was doing. While appropriate methods and engagement processes are critical, what truly matters in my outreach work is what happens when I work collaboratively with community members on outreach projects—critical reflection resulting from extensive dialogue. That often leads to shifting how community residents and I perceive, define, and approach the targeted problem.

For example, in one community I spent approximately six months meeting with a small sub-set of stakeholders. In biweekly meetings, we dialogued about the challenges this community faced in its attempts to implement a new service innovation. Frustration levels were high, and many blamed community leaders or service delivery providers for the problems. As part of this dialogue, I challenged all of us, including myself, to think beyond individual-level explanations (e.g., lazy service providers) for the lagging implementation process. As a result, we began to identify contextual factors that influence how and why service innovations fail. These factors were then targeted in our research and emerged, later, as highly predictive of provider adoption and implementation of innovations.

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Not only did this reflective process create a meaningful set of research questions, but it also facilitated significant perceptual shifts. Stakeholders commented how they would strive to avoid simply blaming providers for a failed implementation in the future. Instead, they would begin to think about how to create a community supportive of such change. To me, this example highlights how engagement not only enhances research quality, but how it can impact stakeholders' perceptions of and actions within community life.

Thinking about outreach as scholarly expression highlights the importance of attending to the impact of our presence *in context*. Because of that, I now think more expressively about these questions:

- To what extent does my work have meaning in this setting?
- How can I enhance its meaning to the community?
- How do I know if it has meaning?
- How do I know if my presence within the community has made a difference?

Our colleague is authentic in her quest to understand the underpinnings of how and why she does what she does, whether it matters, and to whom. She thinks deeply about her practice, questioning her work in essential ways. Because of that, efforts previously taken for granted are now seen as having profound value for her, her community partners, and other communities. Her thinking changes significantly and her approach to outreach evolves accordingly.

We believe that outreach as scholarly expression cannot and will not advance unless reflexivity is valued and encouraged. One of the most effective ways for academics to gain outreach capacity is to learn with, from, and through colleagues who represent diverse disciplines, professions, and interdisciplinary fields. An exciting prospect for learning—individually and for outreach as an endeavor—occurs when colleagues engage in "connected conversations" about their respective outreach journeys.

Concluding Observations

The ideas expressed in this essay are outcomes of collaborative inquiry undertaken by a faculty learning community. Colleagues share readings, engage in dialogue, and pursue collaborative writing projects. We are a diverse group of faculty who span multiple fields (biological science, teacher education, psychology, and sociology), represent multiple MSU colleges, work on different problems and in different settings, and approach outreach differently. We came together because we discovered how much we could learn from one another. Among the things we learned is that the issues we discuss are related to, but essentially different from, some of the outreach literature we read. That recognition caused us to make the distinction between outreach as a form of scholarship and outreach as scholarly expression.

The more that we engage in dialogue, the more we recognize the relevance and power of outreach as scholarly expression. We find that field experiences inform our research and teaching agendas, and vice versa. Outreach keeps us fresh as scholars. It pushes our

thinking and offers an arena for professional (and often personal) development in areas that are of grave concern to society. We routinely involve our students—undergraduate, graduate, and professional—in outreach.

We recognize that faculty colleagues often talk about how much their teaching means to them or how passionate they are about research. In our case, there is "something about outreach" that inspires us in ways unlike any of the other work we do. That "something" to this group of activists is the tangibility of outreach—seeing our scholarship making a difference in people's lives. It is the most dynamic and compelling work in which we engage.

Yet we also find outreach mysterious—infused with paradox and full of surprise. Much like admirers at an art gallery, we gaze at the painting and see different things. We are drawn back, time and time again, gaining new perspective each time. Hearing and reflecting on others' interpretations add to the richness. We are in awe and stand in wonder. We thirst for more. We are less inquisitive about tactic and technique than about the larger issues associated with engaging in outreach appropriately and effectively. We know there is always something more to learn, and that our laboratory beckons.

We understand the importance of revamping reward systems, restructuring organizations, and rewriting mission statements—initiatives designed to better position academic institutions for engagement and to motivate faculty to engage. But none of that is about the faculty's work, really. It is a larger purpose that called us to the academic life—connecting scholarship and practice to address problems that are significant to citizens, institutions, and society.

We conclude this essay by addressing executive academic administrators, outreach funders (public and private), government officials, and others who have a stake in the ongoing development of outreach and engagement. Our message: You will reap significant benefits by investing in outreach as scholarly expression. The field will not prosper without it.

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