

Understanding an Emerging Field of Scholarship: Toward a Research Agenda for Engaged, Public Scholarship

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Introduction

I would have American scholars, especially in the social sciences, declare their independence of do-nothing traditions. I would have them repeal the law of custom which bars marriage of thought with action. I would have them become more scholarly by enriching the wisdom which comes from knowing with the larger wisdom which comes from doing. I would have them advance from knowledge of facts to knowledge of forces, and from the knowledge of forces to control of forces in the interest of more complete social and personal life. (*Small 1896, 564*)

This essay, like all but one of the research papers in these two special issues of volume 12, had its origins when I was a discussant of these papers at a symposium of the 2006 national conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). I have expanded upon those thoughts to include the additional articles and essays in both this issue and the previous issue (volume 12, number 1).¹ The intent of this essay is to use the rich collection of empirical, theoretical, and historical articles to develop a larger and hopefully more comprehensive view of this emerging field, which as yet has many names and a number of different emphases, conceptualizations, and research questions.

As the opening quote evidences, although this is currently an emerging field, the central argument is by no means a new one. Small's language is characteristic of the liberal optimism of the nineteenth century and speaks of a faith in social science that has since become jaded; nevertheless, his call for new scholarship resonates with the works referenced here. As the founding chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, Small presided over the early development of the Chicago School of Sociology, whose emphasis was on an applied sociology that was anchored in the life of the City of Chicago. Not coincidentally, it was also during this time at the University of Chicago that Dewey was beginning to write about education and democracy based on his work with and learning from Jane Addams at Hull House. As the

polemical tone of Small's quote indicates, this has been a contested terrain of how to define scholarship, and as the articles, essays, and book reviews here indicate, it also is an enduring debate.

Terminology: From Umbrella Terms to a Big Tent

One of the striking characteristics of the research articles, the reflective essay, and even the book reviews in these two issues is the variability of the central terminology that is used across authors and even within the same article. At the risk of an exercise in pedantic parsing of terms, it is instructive to examine the umbrella terms used and what each author(s) includes as activities under this umbrella. Recall that the theme of both issues, collectively, is "Faculty Motivation for Engagement in Public Scholarship." Nevertheless, only some authors use this term, *public scholarship*, thus raising the question, Is there is a difference merely in terminology or in the phenomenon being studied, or perhaps

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some combination of both? I am not arguing for standard terminology or a uniform definition, as this would be an exercise in academic imperialism that might inhibit what is clearly an emerging field of practice and scholarship. Since many of the authors include service-learning as a form of engaged scholarship, it is instructive to look at the movement toward definitional clarity and standardized terminology in that field of academic

endeavor over the past twenty years. Kendall's early review of the service-learning literature uncovered 147 different definitions of service-learning (1990). Similarly, prior to that Stanton had argued for categorizing all definitions into two types, treating service-learning as either a specific type of program or an approach/philosophy (1987). Such a categorization might ultimately be useful in sorting out the terminology, meanings, and manifestation of what is presented here under a variety of terms.

Sandmann's essay examining the conceptualization of the scholarship of engagement in higher education over a ten-year period shows how the term has evolved and, as she asserts, does clarify the "definitional anarchy" that exists in the field. But while this historical evolutionary perspective is enlightening, we still need to address the larger universe of other terms and meanings.

As a methodological note for this analysis, I think it can be argued that the authors in these issues represent the key areas of scholarship and traditions in American higher education. That is not to say that all key scholars of this phenomenon—higher education trying to become more responsive to communities in all of their core faculty activities—are represented here, but clearly the authors in these issues are the majority of scholars working in this field.²

In the first of the research and conceptual/philosophical articles, O'Meara has titled her article "Motivation for Faculty Community Engagement." The key term used is *faculty engagement*, which is also referred to in a longer form as *faculty involvement in community engagement*. Included under community engagement, as specified in the opening paragraph, are service-learning, community-based research, and action research. As O'Meara points out, "The term 'engagement' has come to mean many things in higher education." The definition she uses for faculty community engagement is "work that engages a faculty member's professional expertise to solve real world problems in ways that fulfill institutional mission and are public, not proprietary." While she does not include "scholarship" as part of this definition, she does say in the sentence immediately following that "This work, like all scholarship. . ." *Engagement* as a term "is used inclusively to mean forms of service-learning, professional service, community-based research, and applied research that engage professional or academic expertise in partnership with local expertise to address real-world issues."

In the next article Janke and Colbeck use *public scholarship* as their central term and research focus, characterizing it as "an *umbrella term* encompassing service-learning, community-based research, and undergraduate research on public problems" (emphasis added). Throughout the article they use the phrase "faculty engagement in public scholarship," and they focus on the effects of such engagement in this type of scholarship on the dimensions of faculty work.

Using a slightly different empirical approach, Peters, Alter, and Schwartzbach studied faculty views of the meaning and significance of the land-grant mission. They are also interested in the lives and work of faculty in the land-grant institutions "and their own motivations, purposes, roles, work, and experiences as *publicly engaged scholars* and educators. . ." (emphasis added). They then go on to define scholarly engagement as "engagement in which academic professionals function as scholars and/or educators" in "the

everyday politics of public work.” As they note, it is the comprehensiveness of their focal question that distinguishes their inquiry from those interested in only one of the components, such as public work, scholarly engagement, or student engagement. Another variation on their terminology is in their central research question, where they focus on “land-grant faculty members who have reputations as outstanding practitioners of public engagement” and their “experiences as publicly engaged scholars and educators.” Of note here is the introduction of the term *practitioners* as well as educators. This gives their article a broader scope than some of the others, as we shall see later in the overall analysis.

In another study of faculty motivation, Colbeck and Weaver use the title phrase “Faculty Engagement in Public Scholarship.” One of the few consistencies in terminology in these issues is use of the term *public scholarship*; it appears here and also, not surprisingly, in Janke and Colbeck, who are also coming from a land-grant context. Colbeck and Weaver go on to define public scholarship as “scholarly activity generating new knowledge through academic reflection on issues of community engagement [that] integrates research, teaching, and service.” This latter phrase is one of their key arguments: “Public scholarship reframes academic work as an inseparable whole in which teaching, research, and service components are teased apart only to see how each informs and enriches the others, and faculty members use the integrated whole of their work to address societal needs.” This idea of integration may be a distinguishing characteristic of this emerging field, as others see engagement solely as scholarship or service or teaching.

In a conceptual article that proposes to develop an integrated model, Sandmann, Saltmarsh, and O’Meara use the term and title phrase *scholarship of engagement*; many will recognize this as grounded in the language of Boyer in 1990, where he used the terms “scholarship of . . .,” and his later development, in the first issue of this journal, the term “scholarship of engagement” (1996). Sandmann and colleagues write about a new focus on engagement as a core value of the university and echo Schön’s (1995) call for a new epistemology to reflect this paradigm shift toward engagement as fundamental to the work of the academy and its faculty. They present their model in order to provide academic homes for *engaged scholars*. In this model that adds a rich complexity to the discussion and illustrates the various dimensions of what this will mean to the academy, they remain focused on advancing “the scholarship of engagement,” a term they consistently use for an integrated approach to producing and sustaining engaged scholars.

In an empirically based reflective essay, Sandmann traces the evolution and conceptualization of the scholarship of engagement, which she identifies as a generalized concept that has evolved over the past decade. This generalized concept encompasses a panoply of terms and meaning shifts over the first decade of the writings in this journal, which she used for her data on tracing the emerging conceptualization. Under the umbrella of the “national scholarship of engagement movement” she includes “service-learning pedagogy, community-based participatory research, public scholarship, and other intellectual arenas as a set of powerful strategies for collaboratively generating knowledge and practices to alleviate social problems affecting communities.” She identifies four stages of this conceptual evolution: first, the definition of engagement; second, engagement as teaching and research; third, engagement as a scholarly expression; and finally, the current stage of the institutionalization of engagement. Common to Sandmann’s analysis across the stages is the core concept of engagement. This evolutionary analysis of the development of engagement in higher education from 1996 to 2006 is enlightening and clarifies its origins and developmental stages. Whether it clarifies the definitional anarchy as Sandmann intends, remains to be seen in subsequent scholarship.

Finally we turn to the three book reviews as a source of cataloging terminology and conceptualizations. Here may be the greatest variability, given the genre of the writing. Because of the topic of the book that Frabutt reviews, *Community-University Partnerships in Practice*,

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there is no discussion of engagement or scholarship as there is in the empirical and conceptual articles. It is noteworthy, however, that these partnerships are seen as a key part of community-university engagement. This is striking since the focus in the rest of the articles has not been on the community component of engagement, although it has been present implicitly or by explicit mention in varying degrees. While Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett’s book, *Dewey’s Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform*, is certainly a case study of what the other articles have been discussing, Boyte’s review is devoid of the concerns for scholarship and faculty engagement that this book bears witness to.

Instead, Boyte focuses on “A New Civic Politics,” which in this context can be seen as related to the engagement articles. Its emphasis, however, is not necessarily on university scholarship or engagement but more toward the broader questions of public work and citizen activism as they relate to democracy and education, topics that Benson and colleagues unpack and illustrate in their book.

In the last book review we are introduced to a new term, *critical engagement*, by Fear, Rosaen, Bawden, and Foster-Fishman. In her review of this autoethnographic compilation of four scholars’ collective journey to critical engagement, Thomson concludes that engagement is messy and difficult to describe. As Thomson concludes, “Critical engagement is a journey without end. Learning must be integrated into practice. Neither knowing nor doing engagement alone is sufficient.” While this observation may not directly contribute to our definitional clarity, it certainly characterizes the phenomenon we have been trying to capture here.

So where does this review leave us? Do we have a problem of language that can be sorted out by agreeing on whether engagement is a noun or a verb or should be used in its adjectival form, engaged? Where does scholarship fit in? Is it the key activity, and *public* or *engaged* can modify this noun interchangeably? Or is engagement the overall phenomenon?

Some answers to these questions emerge from this collection of scholarship in this emerging field. It seems clear that this is not a problem of language; we do not have sloppy, inconsistent usage. Neither are these inconsistencies just the intellectual preferences of different scholars. These terms are deeply rooted in institutional histories and contexts as well as various movements in higher education. The scholarly challenge is to continue to examine these terms and traditions as Peters and colleagues have done here. This would help avoid the temptation of adopting an easy solution by just stringing all the words together into one big phrase that probably would represent a false consensus at best. Such an ongoing examination would also preserve the roots of the various elements: the Boyer view of scholarship, the community emphasis of service-learning that O’Meara illustrates, and the public scholarship legacy of the land-grant traditions. What we do have is a phenomenon of the emergence, although not uncontested, of engagement in American higher education over the past decade as Sandmann documents. We also have either as part of the same phenomenon or in parallel with it a new understanding and practice of scholarship, including a new epistemology, as Sandmann, Saltmarsh, and O’Meara argue.

I started this essay by implying that a big tent could be erected. So far, what we have is a set of umbrella terms that may include many of the same activities but differ in focus, emphasis, and even intent. While we could force a unified conceptual scheme and have only a few outliers, such an intellectual, abstract, and arbitrary endeavor on the part of one writer is not likely to contribute to a big tent or clarity of terminology—that is, the reduction of “definitional anarchy,” as Sandmann argues. Given that engagement is a new or recently reemerged way to think about intellectual work, I would argue that only an engaged process can ultimately clarify this emerging field and move us forward with a research agenda and a somewhat bounded field of inquiry. Again, I think it is instructive to look at service-learning: only after a decade or so of practice wisdom and working definitions did the field coalesce around a more or less common definition and a fairly clear understanding of what is and what isn’t in the service-learning tent. Now that service-learning is being drawn into the larger tent of engagement, a similar process seems advisable and fruitful here. Indeed, in spite of the parsing and differentiation in which I have engaged in this essay, there is little debate regarding the outer boundaries of this work, and several key dimensions seem to have an emerging consensus. Given these conditions, perhaps we must risk some additional definitional anarchy and let “a thousand terms bloom” before embarking on the activity of bringing closure and clarity.

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Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Given the influences of the positivist tradition on most of us, either direct or vestigial, we might be persuaded by a logical argument that we cannot develop or apply theory, refine variables, or develop research questions until we have clear terms. I would argue that we become comfortable with a constructivist approach to both theory development and methodology by first using the nascent but rich body of scholarship we have and by further constructing theory and methodology in partnership with our communities; in short, I am issuing a call to practice an engaged scholarship that we advocate.

In these two issues we have some key initial building blocks of theory that seem to work well and can be expanded. O'Meara gives us a better view on motivational theories so we can move beyond the narrowly individual and psychological understandings of motivation. Colbeck and Weaver expand this further through motivational systems theory; Sandmann and colleagues offer an integrated model that draws from theories of faculty socialization, institutional change, and campus-community engagement. These are all fruitful starting points.

Perhaps the key methodological challenge is to decide if this phenomenon is to be studied as an independent variable as Janke and Colbeck illustrate or as a dependent variable as Colbeck and Weaver and O'Meara illustrate. Or do we move beyond a hierarchical variable model to develop a more interactive and interactionist approach as Peters and colleagues demonstrate in their study of meaning and practice?

Call for an Engaged Process for Inquiry

What would an engaged process look like and how likely is it to succeed? Another question, though largely unanswerable at this point, is, What would be the timeline be for such a process? I propose a process that would have three key elements. My basis for this is that I have observed and participated in a similar process in service-learning. Janke and Colbeck cite what might be considered evidence of the success of such a process: before 1995 there were 29 peer-reviewed articles on service-learning; since 1995 there have been 840. While the cause of such an increase in scholarship cannot be attributed to one factor, or even all known factors, several factors were at work, including a Wingspread conference that collaboratively produced a research agenda (Giles, Honnet, and Migliore 1991), involvement of practitioners as scholars and with scholars to develop a practice-based inquiry as well as more theoretical research; creating outlets for scholarly exchange such as a new journal—the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, including a special issue (Howard, Gelmon, and Giles 2000) on the results of and responses to an ECS/Campus Compact conference on developing a research agenda for service-learning.

The first element is a practice element to broaden the scholarship to include practitioner voices as cogenerators of knowledge. With the exception of the book review on community-university partnerships, community voice is absent not only in these issues but largely in the field as a whole. This can be done at the local level but needs to be incorporated into national efforts. Additional

narratives of practice, such as the profile of John Gerber, would help us bound our terms and concepts and approach research questions in a grounded, phenomenological, and ethnographic way. Certainly the autoethnographic approach of Fear and colleagues as reviewed here is another possibility. Thus this first element needs to heed the call of Sandmann and colleagues to pursue a new epistemology that engaged, public work requires.

Second, we need an interactive approach. While research agendas and plans of inquiry are never set by summits alone, neither are they set by individual scholars or even small groups of scholars laboring under their own points of view, data variability, and even differing terms. Although agendas might be proposed by a scholar or groups of scholars in order to encourage dialogue, they are probably of limited use beyond being cited for justification of a study or publication. (*See Giles and Eyer 1998.*)

Part of the emergence of this field—what Sandmann calls the scholarship on the scholarship of engagement—has also been an emergence of conferences and networks. Having an explicit focus on developing a research agenda through these conferences and additional ones that could be created for such purposes is useful.

Third, more outlets for this type of scholarly exploration are needed. Such outlets may be special journal issues, such as this one, or symposia at national conferences, such as the ASHE conference in 2006 that gave birth to much of what is in these issues. There is likewise a need for advocacy for inclusion of this type of scholarship in other mainstream journals. Definitional debates and terminology conflicts should be open and part of these scholarly expressions so that a community of scholars and practitioners develops the tent under which they perform and express their public work in a democratic society.

Endnotes

1. All citations in the text are from vol. 12, no. 1 and no. 2, unless otherwise cited.
2. Other scholars who have written about engaged scholarship as an emerging and general phenomenon in American higher education include R. Eugene Rice, Amy Driscoll, Tami Moore, Kelly Ward, Sherril Gelmon, and Barbara Holland. Literatures are also developing in many disciplines: sociology, humanities, engineering, and history, to name a few. Many manifestations of these disciplinary movements are preceded by the adjective *public*, such as the Public Humanities Collaborative at Michigan State University.

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