Frank A. Fear, Cheryl L. Rosaen, Richard J. Bawden, and Pennie G. Foster-Fishman. *Coming to Critical Engagement: An Autoethnographic Exploration.* University Press of America, Inc., 2006. Paperback.

Finding My Voice to Make Democracy Work

Review by Joan S. Thomson

Coming to Critical Engagement explores engagement from the perspectives of the faculty authors. They focus on their individual and collective journey to articulate "what engagement means" and how their understanding of engagement evolved. Engagement is complex; this book explores how, over time, they moved from discussing the process of engagement and how it is done to fleshing out a theoretical and conceptual framework to understand engagement as a transformative process "both for the people involved and for community circumstances" *(p. 292)*.

Focusing on the faculty—scholars'—perspectives rather than the institutional perspectives within which scholarship is carried out is what makes this volume distinctive. Those of us who offer graduate seminars on engagement have had to rely heavily on literature discussing the institutional perspective. Such literature focuses on the infrastructures, policies, procedures, and practices that exist to support engaged institutions, not engagement itself *(Holland 1999)*. To these authors, the Kellogg Report is prescriptive, articulating an institutional perspective defined by administrators, regarding how engagement is done *(Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities 1999)*. Its tone is not open, inviting, or connecting *(p. 51)*. In contrast, these authors view engagement as a personal, professional journey *within* an institution, not a process to be defined by the institution *(p. 49)*.

Other literature frequently referenced on engagement addresses service-learning or civic engagement. But this literature also often narrowly defines engagement in terms of the classroom and the community rather than as an interactive, reciprocal process *in* and *of* the community based on "face-to-face horizontal interactions among people" *(Boyte as cited p. 291)*. "Leadership for the public good" crosses "organizational, political and ideological boundaries" *(p. 280)*. Such engagement is public work, a concept Boyte articulated to reflect a community of people addressing issues of shared, public concern *(Boyte 2004)*.

For the authors of this volume, the quest to understand engagement began with Boyer's challenge to higher education to become

more engaged with society and in so doing expand our visions of what being a scholar means *(Boyer 1990)*. In this volume, the authors share their journey to think in new ways about scholarly engagement. Over time critical discourse became the framework through which the authors explore in substantial depth essential components of engagement: the capacity to build social capital *(pp. 133–154)*, create the context for coempowerment as part of this process *(pp. 155–178)*, and understand what engaging in transformative outcomes means *(pp. 179–243)*. The authors define critical discourse three ways:

- "As a stance: learning is central" *(p. 120)*;

- As a relational process: to examine, critique, evaluate, repeat; that is, cyclical inquiry to learn from one's work *(p. 124)*;

- As text: language and narratives in pursuit of learning *(p. 127)*.

For the authors, critical discourse "emerges from evolving norms and relationships, together with a shared commitment to seek transformative ends" *(p. 119)*. Throughout this process, language matters. What is done depends on how things are understood. For example, is engagement articulated as

- Power *with* vs. power *over*;

- *In* system vs. *of* system;

- *With* public vs. *for* public;

- Part *of* vs. part *from.*

Unfortunately, those who have yet to define engagement for themselves personally rather than have it defined by the institution will emphasize *how* it is carried out. This book's greatest value is not how the authors eventually came to understand engagement. Rather, this volume reinforces the value of creating a safe place in which to explore engagement through critical discourse and self-reflection in order to develop mutual understanding *(p. 117)*.

Engagement is messy; to the authors, determining what *ought* to be done *(p. 192)* is the essence of critical engagement leading to democratic decisions. Such decisions are "*as* socially just, ecologically responsible and spiritually sensitive *as they* are technically effective and economically desirable" *(p. 193)*. Gaining insight into "*what* it means to engage; what it means *when* we engage; and . . . what it means to learn *how* to engage" *(p. 246)* is an evolving process. How the authors have engaged in this process will enable others, both in communities and the academy, to develop an appreciation

for and understanding of what becoming engaged in transforming outcomes can mean.

However, will those comfortable with the expert knowledge/ technology transfer model willingly push the boundaries to explore such evocative questions and in the process recognize the deficiencies of the expert knowledge model? In contrast, for these authors, engaged scholars both influence and are influenced by the environments of which they are a part *(pp. 90–91)*. Engagement is both intellectual and moral, reflecting the social-cultural tensions of these environments. How we think about engagement defines how we practice engagement *(p. 249)*. Consequences do matter. Influenced by disciplinary training, engagement is a lived experience *(p. 274)*; who we are shapes what we do. Over the course of their conversations, the authors arrived at a mutual understanding of what engagement means to them. For them, "*It is about sharing knowledge and learning with those who struggle for social justice; and collaborating with them respectfully and responsibly for the purpose of improving life*" *(p. 58)*.

In the authors' note and introduction, the authors explain how they came to write this volume and determine whether it was more appropriate for those involved to author individual chapters in an edited volume or to share the book's authorship. Reading these sections is essential to understanding the volume's intent. In this coauthored book, however, the distinctive voices of the individual authors, unless clearly labeled, tend to be lost. The dynamics of their conversations as their understandings of engagement evolved become too often a collective voice. Readers are provided limited insight into the predispositions, backgrounds, experiences, and disciplinary orientations of the authors as individuals. These characteristics of our life histories can provide either the borders or windows to collaborative inquiry *(p. 62)* through which new understandings and insights evolve. The multiplicity of perspectives, how differences were merged (if they were), certainly would not have taken place without angst and would have provided additional richness to understanding their discourse.

Few scholars will collectively invest the time and energy necessary to conceptualize and then reflect on their conceptualizations of scholarly engagement and its multiple dimensions. Even fewer academic administrators will provide the space (time and support) for such dialogue to flourish. Only an institution committed to engagement beyond its campus will see merit in supporting its scholars' deliberate, purposive conversations to conceptualize engagement from the scholars' perspectives. And as the authors

state, even within their own institution, writing the outcome of their deliberations—this volume—will be differentially valued within their departments and disciplines *(p. 253)*. In today's academic climate with its increasing demands, individual scholars too frequently would find allocating time for evocative dialogue and self-reflection too risky, overload rather than an integral component of their ongoing professional development and scholarship. Yet understanding engagement as a "field of study and practice over time" *(p. 248)* is finding one's voice.

Even those of us with backgrounds in community engagement with and through land-grant universities rarely find it easy to communicate what engagement is. One knows it; one understands it; one feels it. We recognize its intellectual and moral virtue. Critical engagement is, as this volume clarifies, more than a process. Coming to critical engagement reflects a philosophy shaped over time by experiences, opportunities, and context; critical engagement is dynamic, never static, continuously evolving. Critical engagement is a journey without end. Learning must be integrated into practice. Neither knowing nor doing engagement alone is sufficient. An individual must also feel engaged. Engagement is the expression of the scholar involved in the process. Engagement is one ethos of the professional person reflecting the way in which one understands and practices engaged scholarship *(p. 64)*.

References

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