

Conceptualization of the Scholarship of Engagement in Higher Education: A Strategic Review, 1996–2006

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Abstract

During the past decade, the generalized concept of the scholarship of engagement has evolved. Once a broad call for higher education to be more responsive to communities, it is now a multifaceted field of responses. This article describes the evolution of the term; then, to clarify the “definitional anarchy” that has arisen around its use, it explores the past decade’s punctuations in the evolutionary progress of the concept. Finally, it calls for moving beyond descriptive, narrative works to more critical, empirical research as well as policy analysis and introduces the possibility that the next punctuation will be the development of engaged scholarship’s own theory.

The Beginning of a Movement

“. . . the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement.” Ernest Boyer (1996, p. 11)

Embracing Ernest Boyer’s challenge for higher education to “reaffirm its historic commitment to . . . the scholarship of engagement” has, over the past decade, led to broader conceptualizations of academic scholarship itself and, thus, a stronger integration of faculty research and student learning into the life of communities outside the academy. Educators who define their work within the national scholarship of engagement movement tend to draw from 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 (Bingle, Games, and Malloy 1999). Within this movement, “scholarship of engagement” now references such a wide variety of activities in higher education that confusion often results from the use of the term. This article seeks to clarify the resulting “definitional anarchy” in the field.

Purpose and Literature Being Analyzed

In this article I will (a) review the conceptual development of “scholarship of engagement” and thereby, I hope, (b) contribute to the conceptual clarification of this term. The body of literature reviewed and analyzed for this purpose is the cumulative work of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (originally the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, first issued in spring 1996). This interdisciplinary, refereed journal has as its mission “to serve as a forum to promote the continuing dialogue about the service and outreach mission of the University and its relationship to the teaching and research missions and to the needs of the sponsoring society” (*JHEOE* 2007). Several authors of seminal articles related to the scholarship of engagement in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* have further developed their perspectives in recent books, notably in chapters in Kezar, Chambers, and Burkhardt’s (2005) edited volume, *Higher Education for the Public Good*, but also in others such as Fear, Rosaen, Bawden, and Foster-Fishman (2006), O’Meara and Rice (2005), and Peters and others (2005). These books and other sources are beyond the scope of this review but represent a second body of work that could be reviewed and analyzed by researchers in the field.

Evolution of the Scholarship of Engagement

Over the initial ten-year lifespan of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, the concept of “scholarship of engagement” (SOE) has evolved, becoming differentiated into a multifaceted field. For example, this term may refer to outreach, public service, civic engagement, community engagement, participatory action research, and even community development.

When attempting to understand transformations that take place in emerging disciplines, it is sometimes useful to borrow concepts from other fields that may help to generate conceptual or organizing models to account for historical change. One such model is punctuated equilibrium theory of organizational transformation. This theory is borrowed from evolutionary biology, where it is used to explain the existence of sudden interruptions or disruptions—punctuations—in otherwise continuous fossil records. Punctuation equilibrium theory was advanced by Eldredge and Gould (1972) to account for seemingly radical transformations in speciation following long periods of stasis. Although their theory receives continued debate within paleontology, the fundamental question related to accounting for change against a history of stability

is common to many disciplines. Thomas Kuhn (1970) dug to the essence of the question in his treatise on paradigm shifts. Developmentalists deal with the issue whenever they attempt to explain transitions from one ontogenetic stage to another, particularly when each successive stage represents a systemic reorganization of prior stages. In punctuated equilibrium theory, the punctuations, therefore, represent discontinuous, historical “jumps” in research findings. Investigators from many scholarly fields have borrowed the conceptual framework of punctuated equilibrium theory in efforts to account for change that appears to be abrupt and transformative. Most notably, Gersick (1991) and Romanelli and Tushman (1994) have developed interesting models to explain transformative changes in organization and management.

Romanelli and Tushman summarize punctuated equilibrium theory as depicting

. . . organizations as evolving through relatively long periods of stability (equilibrium periods) in their basic patterns of activity that are punctuated by relatively short bursts of fundamental change (revolutionary periods). Revolutionary periods substantively disrupt established activity patterns and install the basis for new equilibrium periods. (1141)

Thus, organizations experience day-to-day, incremental change (in which not much changes) and, on occasion, radical or revolutionary change (in which structural organizational transformation takes place). Such organizational jumps, or instances of revolutionary change or performance, are occasionally needed for an organization to thrive (e.g., after the discovery of new, disruptive technologies, major structural shifts in the environment, or the arrival of new management).

Another intriguing extension of punctuated equilibrium theory has been advanced by Baumgartner and Jones (1991, 1993) as an explanation for policy formation capable of incorporating elements of both constancy and change. Finally, McLendon (2003) suggests its application to higher education as an analytical framework with which to track changes in the policy agenda’s status of issues. Therefore, while the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind the science of biology may be markedly different from those underlying the study of the scholarship of engagement, conceptual models derived from punctuated equilibrium theory may be useful as exploratory analytical frameworks for illuminating elements of

major transformations in the evolution of the conceptualization of engagement. Therefore, the major developments in the stages of the SOE literature over the last decade are presented as four metaphorical “punctuations.”

Punctuation I: Engagement defined

Many authors of the early works on the scholarship of engagement are organizational leaders substantiating the need for higher education institutions’ engagement with the communities of which they are a part and that fund them (*Magrath 1999; Ramaley 1997; Votruba 1996*). As Boyer challenges higher education to “reaffirm our historical commitments” to society, these other authors acknowledge the historical legacy of higher education’s outreach in the form of the Cooperative Extension Service and other venues. However, they propose revisiting and reframing how this commitment is fulfilled. Thus, works defining the characteristics of engagement dominate the literature as authors seek to equate it with or differentiate it from public service and outreach, the third mission of higher education after research and teaching. In 1998–2000, authors argued for expanding the traditional concept of service and outreach to embrace engagement, which emphasized bidirectional interactions, reciprocity, and mutual respect (*Byrne 1998; Leviton 1999; Ray 1999; Simpson 2000*) instead of one-way assistance or direction. Roper and Hirth’s (2005) history of the third mission of higher education evaluates Boyer’s (1996) conception of engagement as “a new twist for higher education: the two-way street of interactions or partnerships between the academy and the outside world” (p. 12).

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Spanier (1997), too, emphasizes reciprocal relationships between universities and communities: “in the integrated model of the university’s missions, outreach . . . is a partnership through which the university opens itself up to society” (p. 8). He is among the first to articulate the value of integrating the teaching, research, and public service missions: “. . . it is through their synergies that we will create and support the broad-based and active learning community that is best prepared to cope with society’s challenges” (p. 8).

In sum, the first punctuation in the conceptualization of the scholarship of engagement defines its underlying values and incorporates principles of bidirectional reciprocity expressed through campus-community partnerships. This two-way dimension differentiates engagement from outreach, in which resources are extended in one direction only: from the university to the community.

Punctuation 2: Engagement as teaching and research

The next punctuation in conceptualizing the scholarship of engagement uncouples engagement (conceptually if not linguistically) from service, public service, or outreach in its many forms—cooperative extension, technology transfer, economic development, continuing and extended education, and so on. Articles reflect the emergent understanding that engaged partnerships could be manifested through instruction (with service-learning as an instructional pedagogy) and through some types of research (applied research, participatory action research, community-based research). A majority of articles from 2000 to date describe service-learning and university-community partnership cases and identify benefits for both students and communities (*Guerra 2005; Lynch et al. 2005*). However, these articles generally lack the element of knowledge generation with public participation (*Beckman and Caponigro 2005; Daynes, Howell, and Lindsay 2003*). Simpson (2000) is among those who draw from Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) the conclusion that the relevance of application for scholarship is underappreciated: "Sometimes the very act of application leads to new insights, methods, policies, theories and practices that contribute directly to the scholarship of discovery and integration" (p. 9).

Zlotkowski (1997) champions service-learning as a vehicle for academic renewal in universities but does not address its reciprocal or scholarly dimensions. He observes that service-learning "provides a way of grappling successfully with many of the dysfunctions referenced in critiques of the contemporary academy" and "of organizing and coordinating some of the most exciting recent developments in pedagogical practices" (p. 81).

Couto (2000) regards the scholarship of engagement as another name for participatory action research (PAR), which has been in practice for many years. The author argues that PAR moves service-learning to the core of the universities' teaching, research, and service. He projects that PAR is "the form of service learning with the greatest possibility for integration in the classroom and the curriculum" (p. 10). Johnston (2000) introduces yet another term—academically based community service (ABCS)—to describe his

engagement activity, which is an undergraduate course involving participatory action research.

Punctuation 3: Engagement as a scholarly expression

Analysis of the literature shows that over time two tracks of theory and practice have evolved: institutional civic engagement and the scholarship of engagement. By 2001, the unique characteristics of engagement as scholarship were emerging and the scholarship of engagement was differentiating itself under the general umbrella of engagement. Driscoll and Sandmann (2001) connect the scholarship of engagement and notions of scholarship:

The scholarship of engagement continues to . . . expand as campuses manifest context-driven characteristics reflecting the correspondence between their notion of scholarship and their individual history, priorities, circumstances, and location. More and more campuses are embracing a broader vision of scholarship that includes the application and dissemination of knowledge. . . . (p. 11)

Such campuswide initiatives define the scholarship of engagement within the institutional context at several universities (Bruns *et al.* 2003; Lunsford, Church, and Zimmerman 2006; Wise, Retzleff, and Reilly 2002). Notable is the UniSCOPE model from Pennsylvania State University, which recognizes outreach as “a concept that describes a wide range of scholarly activities that involve mainly the integration, education, and application functions of scholarship” and thus “an integral part of the scholarship of teaching, research, and service” (Hyman *et al.* 2001–2002, 60).

More work reflects the two grounding principles of the scholarship of engagement: (1) mutually beneficial, reciprocal partnerships and (2) integration of teaching, research, and service. For example, Weerts (2005) applied Havelock’s theory of knowledge flow to community-university relationships to illustrate the value of reciprocity and engagement. Havelock’s framework identifies factors that inhibit (local pride, coding schemes, status differences) or facilitate (reward value and crisis) knowledge flow among organizations, thus providing insights into how organizations negotiate relationships with outside partners and share or protect knowledge.

Added to this is an understanding of engagement as a scholarly process. By using Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997), Simpson (2000) and Bruns and others (2003) discuss the qualitative standards of scholarship that also apply to the scholarship of engagement:

clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective communication, and reflective critique. Fear, Rosaen, Foster-Fishman, and Bawden (2001) make a contribution as reflective scholar-practitioners when they put scholarship rather than outreach or engagement at the center:

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. (p. 24; *emphasis in original*)

The authors argue that outreach as scholarly expression means understanding what really happens when scholars work collaboratively with community members. They can thus identify and focus on contextual factors influencing the way or the reason for outreach innovation success and failure.

By 2004, Barker's review brings conceptual clarity by indicating that the scholarship of engagement is understood to consist of "(1) research, teaching, integration, and application scholarship that (2) incorporate reciprocal practices of civic engagement into the production of knowledge" (p. 124). To differentiate this particular type of scholarship from the overall engagement movement, terms such as engaged scholarship, scholarly engagement, community engaged scholarship, and public scholarship are applied to work that adheres to both the standards of quality scholarship and the tenets and values of engagement (Bartel, Krasny, and Harrison 2003; Bridger and Alter 2006; Bruns et al. 2003; Lunsford, Church, and Zimmerman 2006). To this discussion can be added the relationship of the scholarship of engagement to Boyer's thinking about the scholarship of integration and, more commonly, the scholarship of application (Astroth 2004). So, although there are multifaceted practices, engaged scholarship (as engagement as scholarship has come to be called) has evolved as a distinct dimension of the engagement movement and is evolving a distinctive scholarly expression and architecture. It builds on and yet differs from traditional scholarship, which is perceived to be disciplinary, homogeneous, expert-led, supply-driven, hierarchical, peer-reviewed, and almost exclusively university-based knowledge generation. Engaged knowledge generation, in contrast, is applied, problem-centered, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, hybrid, demand-driven, entrepreneurial, network-embedded, and so on (Gibbons et al. 1994). Moreover, as the cases

reviewed indicate, over time the distinction between traditional scholarship and engaged scholarship is becoming less bifurcated.

Punctuation 4: Engagement institutionalized

The literature addresses punctuation 4: institutionalization of the scholarship of engagement within and across academe. Several articles ask how the scholarship of engagement can be actualized while facing institutional cultures that emphasize traditional scholarship (*Dana and Emihovich 2004; Fear and Sandmann 2001–2002; Wise, Retzleff, and Reilly 2002*). Lunsford, Church, and Zimmerman (*2006*) describe Michigan State University's development of an institutional framework that identifies and supports engagement as a scholarly function. Adamek and others (*2004*) revisit the authorship and publication of the Penn State UniSCOPE 2000 document to show how investment and energy at the individual and institutional level create a culture of engagement on college campuses. The most common postscript for institutionalizing the scholarship of engagement is represented by Bartel, Krasny, and Harrison's (*2003*) observation that "Universities can systematically address the demands for more social engagement only by exploring new reward and administrative structures" (*p. 89*).

Another approach to institutionalization is represented in recent articles on integrating engaged scholarship into graduate education and thus preparing future faculty to be engaged scholars (*O'Meara and Jaeger 2006*), as well as building the capacity of faculty through professional development programs to conduct scholarly engagement with community partners (*Abrams et al. 2006*). As O'Meara and Jaeger note, "Investments made in graduate programs today will bring community engagement to the center of scholarly agendas, disciplines, departments, and institutions tomorrow" (*p. 21*).

Finally, Sandmann (*2006*) reports on an attempt to institutionalize the scholarship of engagement across higher education through a virtual confederation named HENCE (Higher Education Network for Community Engagement). The purpose of this network is to act strategically as a "guild" with common interests and diverse capacities to advance institutionalized engagement.

From Retrospective . . .

This review represents an initial analysis of the conceptual development of the scholarship of engagement. The themes presented here need verification within a broadened and extended review. Similar analysis is possible for works published during the past decade in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, a

national peer-reviewed academic journal covering research, theory, pedagogy, and issues pertinent to the service-learning community. Additional sources of relevant literature include other higher education or specific disciplinary or association journals such as the *Journal of Community Practice* sponsored by the Association for Community Organization and Social Administration. Proceedings from the International Association of Research in Service Learning and Community Engagement, for example, could also be studied as scholarship emerging from a growing number of professional meetings and conferences on this topic. Finally, books written just on the scholarship of engagement could also be consulted (see, e.g., Van de Ven 2007; Ward 2003).

However, the source of this current review, the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, is the only publication that has as its sole purpose the advancement of the broad field of outreach and engagement; as such, it may be the best representation of scholarship on the scholarship of engagement. When reviewing

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the “punctuations” as represented in the articles in this journal, one can see the developmental status of the definitions and conceptualization of the scholarship of engagement and its current embryonic status as a field of study. Over the years, the literature in this journal has been largely editorial or descriptive in nature. There is now a rich repository “making the case” for engagement in higher education, of cases of engagement enacted in

a variety of contexts through a variety of means, and of cases of emerging institutionalization of engagement and engagement as a scholarly expression in a number of higher education institutions. However, beyond program evaluation of the programs or cases documented in the articles in this journal, there is a paucity of empirical studies and serious policy analysis leading to theory development. Little meta-analysis has been done on the multitude of case studies. Some dialogue on politics, ethics, and social justice is evident (Peters 2003; Wood 2003), but, for the most part, these journal works lack a critical theory perspective.

The voices in the examined writings are those primarily of higher education and outreach administrators, faculty, and outreach professionals and practitioners. Representation of international perspectives has been very limited. Land-grant universities,

with their historical outreach mission, are overrepresented in the journal's contents. Holland's (2005) work suggests that institutions express engagement based on their own unique missions and capacities: thus contributions from different institutional types, such as community colleges and urban and metropolitan universities, would make for a more robust exploration of the scholarship of engagement. A stronger representation of community partners' perspectives would have the same effect, and would be consistent with the norms and values of engagement.

...To Prospective

This article explores four punctuations in the conceptual development of the scholarship of engagement as reflected by articles published in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*. The first defines SOE's underlying values and introduces the principle of bidirectional reciprocity expressed through campus-community partnerships, and it differentiates SOE from outreach, the third traditional mission of the university. In the second, SOE is coupled with the first two traditional missions of the university—research and teaching. The third punctuation tracks the evolution of SOE into scholarly engagement. Finally, the fourth punctuation addresses the institutionalization of the scholarship of engagement within and across academe.

Punctuated equilibrium theory provides an interesting perspective on complex institutional dynamics, particularly for institutions that are highly disaggregated in nature like higher education. It thus offers the potential to develop models that could indicate the next possible developments in the conceptualization of the scholarship of engagement. According to True, Jones, and Baumgartner (1999, 102, as cited in McLendon 2003), macropolitical institutions begin to become involved as more institutions nationally “grapple with [the issue] and with each other in an effort to resolve the new ‘hot’ issue.” Therefore, as the scholarship of engagement becomes a concept that more higher education institutions “grapple with,” the next punctuation could be driven by a vigorous research agenda. Some of the elements needed for such an agenda, such as moving beyond descriptive, narrative works to more critical, empirical research as well as meta and policy analysis, are outlined above. Additionally, the research agenda in the next five years undoubtedly will draw from international, disciplinary, and transdisciplinary perspectives.

The impact on higher education of the various phases of the definition of engagement has yet to be documented. In addition,

deeper discussion and dialogue is warranted to consider the extent to which borrowing theory and ideas from other fields (community psychology, public sociology, community development, and others) may limit or expand the development of engaged scholarship's own theory. The scholarship of engagement is still emerging from its "definitional anarchy" and is still evolving as an interdisciplinary field for academic research.

Acknowledgment

The author wishes to acknowledge the editorial review and advice of Hiram E. Fitzgerald, associate provost, University Outreach and Engagement, and University Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Michigan State University, in the preparation of this article.

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