

## COMPLICATING NOTIONS OF 'SCHOLAR-ACTIVIST' IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: A DISCUSSION PAPER

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**Abstract:** *The language of 'scholar-activist' has made its way into academic discourse over the last few decades. Historically a divide has existed between academics situated in the university and activists working within and across communities. This discussion paper addresses challenges scholars face when doing activist work within their institutional and community settings and on an international level. We explore the ways in which 'scholar-activism' has been taken up in the academy and how it is shaped by local and global contexts. Specifically, we discuss the factors that influence the work of those claiming to be scholar-activists who are interested in working for social change. We suggest that if scholar-activists are to maintain respectful relationships across individual and community differences, we must first negotiate how we may be differently positioned in terms of privilege, power, resources, race, identity, history of colonialism, and personal and national identity. We hope that this discussion paper will generate dialogue among our international colleagues about the possibilities of shifting beyond our local contexts to work respectfully, cross-culturally and to create global partnerships. Ultimately, we question how we can work with our global partners to build a basic and productive foundation upon which we might engage scholar-activism and contribute to creating social and institutional change.*

**Key words:** Scholar-activism, social justice education, global partnerships, international education

### Introduction

In our work as academics in the Canadian context, we try to incorporate our social justice and equity goals. This is not always easy in a context that supports a neo-liberal agenda that emphasizes standardized processes and better "bang for the buck." With continued cutbacks to higher education and with decisions on how to spend resources often made based on neo-liberal ideology, less room exists to implement a social justice agenda either in a scholarly or an activist way. We are interested in exploring the possibilities of emphasizing social justice goals while positioned in institutions like universities. We are curious about what constitutes the work of a scholar-activist and the challenges scholar-activism creates for institutional contexts where the production and advancement of knowledge are often privileged over action. We would also like to

understand better the challenges for scholar-activists when connecting to communities where activism is understood as a particular kind of action connected to the everyday work of fighting for individual and community rights, action often very distanced from the knowledge producing priorities of universities.

In the context of growing interest in the global world, increasingly, Canadian academics are entering international spaces seeking to conduct collaborative research. Faculty members are competing for monies to advance their research agendas as well as to meet university criteria to be successful in their academic lives (e.g. receive tenure and promotion, move through the ranks). Currently, much of this funding is being directed towards global research initiatives that require North/South partnerships between individuals and institutions that have varying degrees of access to resources. Those of us in

resource rich contexts striving to achieve social justice ends must raise questions about our work globally as we seek to foster respectful international partnerships.

In the discussion paper that follows we consider the challenges academics, those who work for educational and social change, face when their work straddles what has been historically understood as “on-the-ground” work in the activist domain and what continues to be perceived as the intellectual work of universities. To begin our discussion, we outline how the “scholar,” “activist” and “scholar-activist” have been constructed and note the challenges university situated scholars face within their institutions and the communities with which they engage when doing activist work. Following a brief consideration of our locations within this discourse as social justice educators we distinguish global scholar-activism from local scholar-activism and ask: what does scholar-activism look like in a broader global/international context? Finally, we present five working principles for scholar-activists and others working in the field. We see these principles as useful for understanding and addressing how we might do this work when partners have unequal access to necessary life and educational resources. The principles also help us remain mindful of how we might build respectful relationships across difference when taking up activist work globally without continuing colonizing/ imperialist practices or replicating the North/South divide that can translate into marginalization, injustice, and oppression. We hope that this paper will generate dialogue among our international colleagues about how we can work with our global partners to build a basic and productive foundation upon which we might engage scholar-activism and contribute to creating social and institutional change.

### **What Is in a Name?**

Labels such as scholar and academic are often interchanged. A scholar is a “learned person” (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004, p. 1111), an academic “a member of an institution of learning, “very learned but inexperienced in practical matters” (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004, p. 6). A long history of a divide between the theoretical and the practical are at the root of what differentiates the scholar and activist. One characterization of a scholar Collins (2005) articulates is that of “... [a] knowledge expert who toils in archives, laboratories, or other isolated spaces. Usually a scholar engages in an exhaustive exercise of knowledge gathering by digging deeply into a nuance of a specific subject, to the point where he or she may be one of a handful of experts on it” (p. 27). These individuals, Collins reminds us, may be perceived among those outside academe as isolated “nerds” gathering “esoteric knowledge.” Many academics [us included] would argue this historical framing no longer holds true for what many of us do in universities where our work is divided among teaching, research, and service. The service component for some is maintained through their connections to communities outside university contexts. For others, this service component is shaped within the university with service to faculties, departments, and the larger institution. More often than not, scholarly activity is rewarded with tenure and promotion and research monies, while work connected to activist leanings, can be construed as taking time away from or interfering with scholarly endeavors.

In the case of activists, they are commonly thought of as people who fight against oppressions in multiple forms. A dictionary definition suggests that activists believe in a “doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue (Merriam-Webster Inc, 2004, p. 13). *Activist* practice is, as Conway (2004) explains, a “distinct and essential source of knowledge” that informs the work of those involved in social

movements who “wish to change the world and believe that human agency is central to that possibility” (para. 16). Activist practice is generally understood as separate from the scholarly work outlined above. This diametrically opposed positioning of activist and scholarly work seems stark and less representative of the work of university scholars in current times, especially those engaged in research and teaching with social justice goals in mind.

Given these differences, activists may hold distinct impressions about and be suspicious of scholars and their work. They often do not trust scholars whom they see as socially detached, overly specialized and privileged intellectuals with better access to resources, full salaries, and relative job security. This lack of trust may lead to suspicions that scholars, who work in an institution that privileges individualized rather than collective work, do not (or perhaps cannot) share the same political goals, practical methods or work ethic (see Chatterton, 2010).

### **Scholar-Activist: Somewhere-in-Between**

As a starting point, it is worth noting that scholar-activism, at least as a concept informing educational goals, is not new. Dewey has famously claimed that scholars should “shape reality toward positive social goals, not stand aside in self righteous isolation” (1969-91). Freire (1993) similarly held that educational policies and practices have social implications – they can move to socially transform, or they can perpetuate injustice and exclusion. Gramsci (1971) proposed that, “The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer [and] ‘permanent persuader’” (p. 68).

Dyson (2004) has challenged scholars to step out of and “look beyond a comfortable career, a safe niche behind academe’s protective walls, and a serene existence removed from

cultural and political battles that shape the nation’s fate” (p. xxvii). Apple (2009) has made similar calls for scholars to take into account their subjective, institutional, and political locations in their theory and practice so that they might make effective democratic change for community members, children and teachers alike. In this regard, the scholar has historically been seen as having a responsibility for connecting intellectualism and knowledge with practical ‘on the ground’ action. And yet, as a range of literature about scholar-activism admits, “Activist research in academic institutions is rare” (Greenwood, 2008, p. 319).

Conway (2004) makes an important distinction between a political scholar and the scholar-activist. She suggests that a politically committed scholar is “one with ‘progressive’ political values and ideas” (para. 8). Although scholar-activists are also politically committed, they differ from political scholars in that they also work *as* activists *with* activists in non-academic spaces in which “the scholar is not first and foremost (or ever!) recognized as a scholar” (para. 9) but as part of the broader community of thinkers, workers, sharing in a collective vision, goal, and idea of change. Being a scholar-activist, she suggests, means sharing in the everyday work, participating in “endless meetings” and valuing the range of contributions made to the cause. She adds:

In becoming an activist, the scholar activist becomes another kind of knower. S/he has access to another kind of knowledge than does the ‘politically progressive’ academic. The knowledge arising from activist practice is a perspectival/situated knowledge, one which is essential and privileged in formulating and addressing the problematics of social change in our time, and which is both enriching *and transformative* of the work of ‘politically progressive’ scholars. (Conway, 2004, para. 19)

Pulido (2008) argues that there are multiple ways one can be a scholar-activist and suggests that each interpretation has its own virtues. For example, scholar-activism may consist of viewing one's theoretical and intellectual work as "directly contributing to activism" while others might see it as "those who engage in advocacy research" or, from another perspective, "those who practice 'militant ethnography'" (Pulido, 2008, p. 348-9). Pulido also draws attention to the importance of location and *where* one chooses to create change. For example, we see the contextual nature of scholar-activism when we ask: "Will you direct your energies toward transforming the campus, the local community, the country, or the world" (Pulido, 2008, p. 348). Regardless of one's specific vision, how scholar-activists carry out their roles varies considerably (among scholar-activists as well as over time for individuals continuing to do this work) as some may choose to take on leadership positions while others adopt roles as "rank-and-file" members.

Gilmore (1993) refers to the work of scholar-activism, especially work that seeks to be oppositional and counter-hegemonic, as "organic Praxis" (p. 73). This, she explains is 'talk-plus-walk: it is [the] organization and promotion of ideas and bargaining in the political arena (p. 71). The 'walk' refers to the ways that academics are able to politically advocate for others as they work to transform oppressive structures, support those in marginalized positions, and identify subjugated knowledge.

Where scholar-activists agree is in their regard for "creative, positive social change as their major goal" (Young, Battaglia, & Cloud, 2010, p. 431) and in their efforts to seek ways they can be "politically relevant in the 'real world'" (Mendez, 2008, p. 140). Part of this agenda includes creating institutional change that supports activism in the university domain. Some argue that institutions have

created an artificial divide between intellectualism and action (Hale, 2008). As Katz-Fishman & Scott (2005) put it, "theory and practice are two aspects of a powerful, dialectical unity born out of and continuously tested in our social struggle to end all forms of exploitation and oppression. Neither can exist without the other" (p. 371). This means that social transformation must recognize that "the analytical and methodological tools of social analysis are not the 'private property' of academics and the academy" (Katz-Fishman & Scott 2005, p. 373). Thus, scholar-activists need to appreciate that part of their responsibility includes upholding the links between 'scholar' and 'activist', recognizing that change and liberation cannot occur if there is a divide between theory and activism (see Hewitt, 2005). This means challenging the false binary that has arisen between the academy and activist social justice movement work.

### **Locating Ourselves within the Discourse**

We consider our work in the academy against the backdrop of the literature on what constitutes scholar activism. Although we both practice a critical pedagogy and we keep social justice and equity goals in mind, we spend little time on the front lines with individuals working actively within community structures. In one sense, we see our work reflecting what Pulido (2008) points to as activism within the academy for the purposes of changing the academy. We support those within our institutions who are marginalized in ways we understand as helpful, and we encourage our colleagues and students to do the same. We point to and remind people of the equity policies in place in our institutions making explicit the ways in which racism and other inequities are infused in everyday institutional practices that are, more often than not, taken-for-granted.

Our research is aimed at understanding educational and cultural practices that support the continuation of oppressions and the

inequitable treatment of some bodies over others. Leanne inquires into the realities for mixed-race and other racialized bodies whose experiences point to material effects and the privileging of particular kinds of knowledge, while Susan continues to examine the meanings of institutional whiteness in relation to privilege and power. Our teaching and research intersect and inform our critical praxis that contributes to the students in our classes, who are practicing teachers and teacher candidates, exploring their identities and multiple positionings while theorizing the processes of marginalization and the privileging of particular kinds of knowledge and experience. Although we hesitate to use the language of scholar-activist because of our lack of direct physical connection to community contexts and concerns, the discourse provides space for academics working as we do to adopt the language of scholar-activist if we so choose.

As we observe the push within Canadian universities to advance more global perspectives and to tie access to funding to international initiatives and partnerships, we wonder how those of us working within critical perspectives with social justice and equity goals in mind can respectfully contribute to and support global initiatives and research. In our local institutional and community contexts, we struggle to understand the ways in which multiple socio-cultural divides influence our work and often position us in places of privilege. Even when the connections to social justice and equity goals appear to be embedded in the international research perspective and holds interest for us, we hesitate and question the possibilities of transitioning from the local to the global in ways that benefit ourselves more than our international partners, research participants and contexts.

### **Moving from Local to Global**

Much of the scholar-activist literature addresses scholar-activism from a point of view of local activism, and much of the

emphasis is on the North American context. Building on this literature, we distinguish global scholar-activism from local scholar-activism and situate this work within the international context. To do scholar-activist work internationally means making new connections and sharing ideas with different institutions and organizations across national, cultural, and political boundaries. This means not only considering the impact of globalizing processes on each of our local contexts (which is certainly important), but also considering how one might effectively apply their social justice goals in a global context. At the local level challenges can arise due to individuals' and communities' differences including access to resources. However, complications multiply when tensions and contradictions emerge working within the context of a North/South divide.

Scholar-activists must consider their vision of social change in relation to the global communities in which they seek to do work. International colleagues working in southern locations, particularly those located in small, remote areas and who are fairly isolated in their work, may hold very different (and perhaps more immediate and practical) social justice goals related to their "on the ground" experiences and critique of the effects of globalization. Mendez (2008) notes that many communities may have "much more invested in concrete, short-term goals than in more lofty goals of changing society" (p. 153). Crossing international boundaries, scholar-activists must be aware that globally based institutions and organizations are likely to be no more homogenous or free of conflict and contradiction than their local counterparts are. Moreover, as 'outsiders', scholar-activists who may choose to position themselves as neutral observers of these conflicts need to be aware that "sooner or later one has to choose sides or risk taking on the role of the disinterested expert who cannot stoop to the level of taking a stand on issues" (Mendez, 2008, p. 153). Given that scholar-activism on a global level often occurs in regions that are

experiencing challenges in infrastructure and access to resources, northern partners who come from resource rich contexts need to understand the differences that influence their work in the “foreign” context. Damaging practices can be in place even when people work with the best intentions.

### **Toward a More Respectful Global Scholar-Activism: Some Working Principles**

As scholars who have been invited to conduct international research, we understand that many complications that arise when working at the local level can be magnified and unpredictable in global contexts. In order to ensure that we adhere to our social justice goals and continue to foster respectful and ethical international partnerships, we have developed several working principles. We see these principles as useful guidelines that help us decide when and whether or not we should conduct international work, what our process should be once we have begun, and how we might sustain ongoing relationships with partners and organizations beyond a single project.

#### **1. Think Before You Say ‘Yes’**

The opportunity to participate in international research and collaborate with international organizations can be tempting for academics whose universities are increasingly applying pressure to secure international funding and foster global partnerships. When presented with an international research opportunity, scholars may agree without fully exploring whether their involvement is productive or even necessary. We believe that before scholar-activists forge ahead in any global work they must first carefully consider the value of their participation. A central part of this principle involves saying “no” if we feel the work cannot be done respectfully because the international agenda supports questionable policy and practices.

Other questions we suggest as important to be asked when deciding whether to accept an

invitation to do international work, or whether to initiate that work ourselves include: Why are we interested in doing this work? Are we appropriately prepared to do this work? Do we understand as fully as possible our responsibilities? This is not to suggest that scholar-activists should not be engaging in or creating important international partnerships, but that we should always reflect on our motivations. As academics, we are deeply influenced by institutional expectations and demands including pressures to publish, present our work, and build our scholarly careers. We need to keep in check the ways that these goals may overshadow our intentions and actions in international research partnerships.

#### **2. Create Early Conversations**

We suggest that scholars who have decided to work in international contexts and who are interested in creating social change must be clear from the start about our partners’ expectations for our involvement. What expertise, knowledge, and interests are we expected to bring and what expertise already exists ‘on the ground’? How is our role envisioned? This also means clarifying whether our involvement is long term or short term or somewhere in-between. What other partners (e.g. global activists) are involved and how might we also work with them productively? We may also need to consider how we might connect with other activists internationally and not just our international partners working in universities or other institutional settings. As part of our conversations we need to focus on understanding our partners’ positioning and their understandings of scholarly and activist work. Do they work in tandem with activists in their communities? In such conversations we should be actively listening to the internal dynamics that may be at play and learning more about our partners’ connections to activists and their communities and the institutional resources available for our colleagues to do their research. We must ask

what kind of impact can they/we realistically have?

Engaging in early conversations and creating an open dialogue also means getting to know the context in which you plan to work. Although this may seem obvious, even well meaning scholar-activists may not appreciate the ways their politics, use of terminology, and application of concepts may carry different meaning in a global context. Pierre (2008) explains how, as a Black American anthropologist, she experienced very different understandings of blackness in Africa, where she had sought to explore race and racializing processes. Through her work in urban Ghana, she understood better how racialization was not always conceptualized or addressed in the same way she understood the process. She explains how her research topic in urban Ghana was “often met with blank stares or agitated questioning of either my use and definitions of ‘race’ (as opposed to ‘ethnicity’ or ‘culture’) or my research methodology” (Pierre, 2008, p. 124). Similarly, our views on cultural concepts, methodology and research processes will often differ from those of the people with whom we enter international partnerships.

### **3. Confront Our Identities and Privileges**

Scholar-activists must continually situate and understand their identities in relation to the international contexts in which they work. Our identities, and the privileges we carry as a result of those identities, may be magnified in global contexts. We each carry various racial, class, and cultural privileges, as well as institutional power (conferred through our academic positions and associations). Recognizing our privileges and power allows us to ask what might happen when white, foreign scholar-activists from Northern privileged universities enter research contexts in a predominantly non-white developing South. These contexts carry long histories of colonialism where white and light-skinned bodies may more overtly and differently represent forms of historical violence. As

scholars teaching and researching with social justice goals in mind, we take seriously Hale’s (2008) caution that “...there is serious reason to question the extent to which activist scholarship, carried out by predominantly white scholars in Third World settings, or among communities of color in the North, is capable of countering the structured hierarchies of racial privilege” (p. 20).

We see how our biases and locations operate in the local context and so must similarly consider how our biases will impact our global work. For example, given the dominance of English, and the reality that this may be the first and/or only language spoken among scholar-activists in the North, how do we expect to participate in a context in which our partners may not have English as their first, second, or third language? While we realize we can and wish to be positive allies in support of our global partners, recognizing our racial, social, and cultural privileges (and how they operate in different historical and geographical contexts) may mean that we talk less, work hard to ensure that space is available for differently positioned people to speak, contribute to different types of work when needed, and act as advocates when possible.

### **4. Be Willing to Take a Back-Seat and Consider Alternative Roles**

Conducting respectful research also means recognizing that our best contribution may be ‘behind the scenes’. Although we may seek to ‘help’ or ‘support’ our international partners, we must keep in mind the ways in which our involvement may be perceived by those with whom we work. This means recognizing that some may hold resentment toward our personal involvement specifically or more generally toward international Northern involvement in local affairs. Others may be suspicious that we will arrive with plans to tell them what to do or suggest fundamental ‘outsider’ changes. A willingness to adopt alternative roles may be essential if we wish

to create a positive working environment and navigate potentially tenuous political structures (e.g. doing ‘the grunt work’ and taking off our scholar ‘hat’ at times).

At other times, taking a backseat may mean understanding that our most effective role is not “in the field.” We may work more effectively providing support for our colleagues who engage in scholar-activism in our institutions and who are forging strong global partnerships, but may be facing local institutional barriers that reflect the institutions’ concerns about whether the work is scholarly or rigorous enough to fit the university criteria.

### **5. Who Benefits? Being Accountable and Reciprocal**

As Pulido asserts (2008) “The whole point of being a scholar activist is that you are embedded in a web of relationships” (p. 351). As part of a broader community, scholar-activists must also be held to a high level of accountability. Being held accountable means, Pulido suggests “seeing yourself as *part* of a community of struggle, rather than as the academic who occasionally drops in” (p. 351).

Being reciprocal signifies “a mutual give and take and is something that scholar activists must always be attentive to” (Pulido, 2008, p. 351). Pulido raises questions about those who “swoop in”, extract information, data, and whatever else they need from a community while leaving very little behind for the community itself. This practice is often justified by arguments that scholars are sharing the untold stories of marginalized groups. However, “writing about a community’s plight or struggle should *not* be confused with reciprocity” (p. 352). Where are the benefits for the community? Who actually gets to hear these stories? It makes sense then that many international community organizations are cautious about how much they want to share their experiences. Certainly, the effects of global capitalism

have also meant, as Mendez (2008) states, “It is easy to imagine a transnational corporate jet-setter, off to broker the latest privatization deal or international corporate merger, sharing an airplane armrest with a ‘transnational’ scholar en route to the latest international conference in a five-star hotel in which his or her sheets will be changed by Third World immigrant workers (most likely brown or black women)” (p. 148). Doing this work means constantly reminding ourselves (and demonstrating this among the communities with whom we are working) that we respect this work as a collective process and not privileged independent work.

As part of our efforts to be accountable and reciprocal, we encourage scholar-activists to ask whether their collaborative research will lead to positive action and change. What effects will it have and whom will it ultimately benefit? How far does that collectivity take us? Does it mean we stay longer or get involved more fully when faced with crises such as political conflicts or civil war? As scholar-activists, we must recognize that we enter global research contexts as learners as well. In so doing, we must continually strive to ensure that we are not the ones benefitting more than our partners or research participants. This challenge is heightened further when we consider that in North/South collaborations the funding is often in the hands of the Northerners. How, then, does the money get distributed and who assumes responsibility for the research? We stress the importance of ensuring that the research (whether data, models, tools or strategies) belongs to the communities with which we are working. Any knowledge acquired through our research collaborations must also return to those communities so that they can make desired change.

### **Conclusion**

Are we scholar-activists? In terms of the discourse our work fits within the definitions articulated in the literature describing scholar-activism. We do see ourselves as having a

role in creating positive social change. We understand theory/practice as in relation, both informing our scholarly and activist perspectives. However, we think a more important question is: why choose such a label? What is in a name? A number of people collect together under the umbrella of scholar-activist. There is strength in numbers. When we identify in such a collective way we can find and connect with our allies. We can stand together and work to make visible the limitations of our institutions for promoting social justice and equity goals. We can also support each other as we advance our research and teaching in ways that question the status quo whether in our local contexts or abroad. We can support each other in the face of those

who may question the usefulness of our work, particularly when at times it seems more 'activist' than 'scholarly'. Within scholar-activist communities we can ask difficult questions about the connections we make in global contexts including whether or not our work abroad makes a contribution to social justice or contributes to continuing colonization and oppression.

Together we can find ways to support and work with individuals who are situated in the communities outside of academe. Part of our goal may be to help dispel the caricature of the university scholar that so quickly comes to mind for those individuals who appear more often than not on the front lines.

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