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The “New” Scholarship: Implications for Engagement and Extension

Frank A. Fear and Lorilee R. Sandmann

Abstract

The engagement movement in higher education is related to the groundbreaking work of the late Ernest Boyer. The magnitude of Boyer’s contribution is considerable, reflected certainly in the words of the late Donald Schön—a prolific contributor in his own right—when he interpreted Boyer’s proposals as “the new scholarship.” Despite his admiration for Boyer, Schön was not enthusiastic about the prospects for change in higher education. He believed that the academy’s prevailing institutional paradigm, what Schön called “technical rationality,” stood in conflict with the new scholarship. In this paper we summarize and interpret Schön’s argument. We then discuss the implications of the new scholarship for the engagement movement. We close by considering implications of the new scholarship for cooperative extension, a higher education organization that actively affirms scholarship and engagement.

Introduction

Practicing scholarship in today’s environment is like swimming across a treacherous river.

The river’s current is strong, not placid. Our swimmer recognizes the complexity of the endeavor, knowing that it is different and more difficult than experiences she has had in the past. She adjusts her stroke and pace accordingly, swimming judiciously and artfully. A successful experience will build capacity and elevate confidence. She is gaining the skills necessary to swim successfully in diverse environments.

Much like a rapid river, higher education today has swift and complex currents. Today is no time to stand pat, to put “old wine in

new bottles” and to believe that “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” These are times that propel us forward, sometimes unpredictably and without warning. The option to interpret new challenges in accustomed ways is always there. But our swimmer knows the danger of thinking that way. Success—survival in her case—is contingent on learning and adapting.

Are we swimming differently in higher education these days in terms of how we think about our scholarly obligations? The prevailing opinion is likely to be a resounding, “Of course!” The pervasive impact of Ernest Boyer’s work is undeniable. By describing multiple forms of scholarship in *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) and expressing his thinking in evolved form in later years (see, for example, 1996), Boyer enfolded the work we do as scholars, elevating it comprehensively to the status of scholarship. Those who devote careers to teaching, interdisciplinary pursuits, and applied work can thank Boyer for that.

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Yet there is freshness and power in Boyer’s writings—a provocative way of thinking about the scholarly life—that can’t be fully captured by simply affirming a diverse range of work as scholarly. By the same token, Boyer’s legacy includes

but extends beyond his ability to inspire, as he did compellingly in the engagement essay published as the first article in the inaugural issue of this journal (Boyer 1996). And it doesn’t seem complete if we interpret Boyer’s work only through the lens of reform. That happens, for example, when we seek to modernize traditional academic functions by exchanging learning for teaching, discovery for research, and engagement for service. Interpretations of that sort can trivialize the magnitude of his contribution (see Fear et al. 2001).

Schön’s Interpretation of the “New” Scholarship

The late Donald Schön believed that Boyer’s work was anything but trivial. He evaluated it using an awesome term, the “new scholarship” (Schön 1995). At the same time, Schön believed Boyer’s work was only potentially transformational for higher education. Why the caveat? Schön contended that the “new scholarship” conflicts philosophically with the prevailing ethos of the research

university, academe's most prestigious and admired institutional expression. In making this argument, Schön did not retreat to the oft-heard refrain, "In the end, research is most valued." His argument had fundamentally nothing to do with research. It had everything to do with the prevailing way (according to Schön) many of us prefer to think about "how we know what we know"—in other words, about epistemology. Schön calls that epistemology "technical rationality." Technical rationality is the way that many of us go about the work we do as scholars. It is the use of rigorous and systematically applied procedures. It "lives" in the form of many of our research designs; the way courses and curricula are typically structured and offered; and how we often design, undertake, and evaluate outreach projects. Technical rationality is not just the dominant way we go about our academic work; it influences the way academic institutions are designed and operate. For Schön, the research university values technically rational teaching, research, service, and operations. In his eyes, technical rationality is an institutional epistemology, that is, a preferred organizational theory of knowledge.

What is helpful about Schön's interpretation is that he forces us to fundamentally reframe from the way we might otherwise read Boyer. He is, in effect, telling us that we are swimming in new waters. Technical rationality, the waters in which we have swum for years, are too tranquil for what Boyer has expressed. Like the spokesperson on the automobile commercial, Schön proclaims, "This changes everything!"

That belief is clearly reflected in the title of an article written by Schön and published in *Change* magazine, "The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology." He wrote in strong terms:

[I]f the new scholarship is to mean anything, it must imply . . . norms of its own, which will conflict with the norms of technical rationality—the prevailing epistemology built into the research universities. . . . If we are not prepared to take on this task, I don't understand what it is we are espousing when we espouse the new scholarship. If we are prepared to take it on, then we have to deal with what it means to introduce a new epistemology . . . into institutions of higher education dominated by technical rationality. (1995, 25, 37)

The norms of which Schön speaks are, in our opinion, norms of engagement. These norms include respectfulness, collaboration,

mutuality, and dedication to learning with emphasis on the values of community, responsibility, virtue, stewardship, and a mutual concern for each other. The eminent public policy analyst Daniel Yankelovich (1999) expresses the importance:

For purposes of gaining control over people and things, the knowledge of technical and scientific experts has proven superior to other ways of knowing. But for the truths of human experience—learning how to live knowledge is awkward, heavy-handed, and unresponsive. It fails to address the great questions of how to live, what values to pursue, what meaning to find in life, how to achieve a just and humane world, and how to be a fully realized human person. (196, 197)

Discussion

Where does this leave us? Technical rationality has great value. Its exercise has contributed enormously to the development of modern society as we know it today. But Schön reads different purposes in Boyer's words and, accordingly, rejects technical rationality as the paradigmatic frame of reference for the "new" scholarship. What, then, might be that alternative frame of reference?

Years ago, Jurgen Habermas (1971) wrote about three forms of knowledge and their connection to what he called "human purpose." The first form of knowledge enables the achievement of instrumental ends. An example is Schön's technical rationality, the bulwark of modern science and technology. The alternative that Schön and Yankelovich affirm conforms to other knowledge-human purpose links described by Habermas: communicative knowledge and emancipatory knowledge. The purpose of communicative knowledge is to enhance human understanding by sharing beliefs and perspectives on matters of mutual importance through means such as dialogue. Emancipatory knowledge promotes individual and collective growth through self-critique and critique of social systems. It empowers learners by countering potentially distorted or limited points of view.

For us, the fundamental issue in this entire matter is mindfulness. It is too easy to interpret Boyer's contributions through the lens of higher education's dominant paradigm, technical rationality. For many, this is our paradigm of choice. That paradigm is good for many things, but it is not good for all things—the new scholarship is one of them. If we interpret and advance the new

scholarship, including engagement, through technically rational eyes, we will likely constrain its reach. We'll likely bring it to the level of everydayness, taking limited steps and declaring them to be "new." More than likely, we'll focus our energies on getting better at what we already know how to do and/or fixing the system so that it works better. In effect, we'll restrict the prospects of transformation by our own hand. The alternative is permitting ourselves to think extraordinary thoughts and then to engage in extraordinary practices—to be swept to a new place, a new way of being, and a new way of engaging. Isn't that what transformation means?

To make matters worse, any dominant paradigm is a hegemonic force. The conventionally accepted practice is powerful, often making it difficult for those with alternative ideas and practices to gain acceptance. The exercise of authoritative and collegial influence can suppress atypical expressions because they fail to conform to "the things here." _____ way we do
 may sound _____ As odd as it
 when institu- ***"For us, the fundamental*** to some,
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 happen, the _____ make change
 be hegemonic. It is often liberating for faculty to know that the uni- response can
 versity does not have a specific institutional outcome in mind but, instead, affirms diverse expressions as legitimate and worthwhile (see, for example, Fear, Adamek, and Imig 2002).

We came to the Penn State conference believing that the foregoing treatment had significant implications for engagement as a form of the "new" scholarship. We left the conference convinced of it. We also left the conference believing that it has as much (if not more) relevance for the way engaged scholarship is being interpreted and practiced in extension. We now turn to implications in both domains—engagement and extension—starting with engagement.

Implications for Engagement

We concur with Schön and will not to look at engagement through the paradigmatic lens of technical rationality. We see all three forms of knowledge described by Habermas—instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory—as relevant for engagement. We do not affirm instrumental knowledge as the most important, and believe each knowledge form serves valued social purposes.

We also seek to avoid impairing the development of communicative and emancipatory knowledge. That happens frequently and often unknowingly. For example, the senior author recently experienced a heavily facilitated and directed “dialogue session.” Participants were told by the facilitator that it was important to participate efficiently, get things done, and make judicious progress. This is hardly what dialogue is about; we had precious little time for listening to and exploring each other’s ideas (communicative knowledge). When something along this line happens, and we believe it often does, it may be because those responsible have not engaged sufficiently in “reflective practice,” engaging in honest and deep conversations about the essence of their work (*see, for example, Foster-Fishman’s reflection in Fear et al. 2001*).

Engaging in reflective practice is one of the norms of engagement, we believe. It is among many approaches and practices associated with “alternative paradigm inquiry,” including qualitative and participatory approaches. These alternative expressions are not new; they are simply alternatives to conventional ways (technically rational ways) of knowing and practicing. Over time, and

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slowly but surely, they are being affirmed as legitimate scholarship—the “new” scholarship.

The result? What had been a fairly conventional and stable approach to scholarship (a placid lake in which to swim) is today a fertile, evolving, multifarious, and even contested environment (a rapid river).

In today’s academy, scholars need to recognize, understand, and respect multiple ways of knowing, interpreting, and practicing. For example, rigor is no longer seen universally as *the* supreme value. The long-standing belief that scholars are “value free” and can be “objective in their work” is viewed by some scholars as myth and distraction. Expressive forms of scholarship, including storytelling, are supplementing conventional forms of presenting “findings.” Indigenous knowing is valued to the point that expert knowing through the scientific method is considered an approach and not the approach. As feminist scholar Patti Lather (1991) puts it, “We seem somewhere in the midst of a shift . . . toward a view of knowledge as . . . incessantly perspectival and polyphonic.”

Because of this, the landscape of scholarly work is changing dramatically. For example, service-learning—once operating

largely as a student services function—has become in recent years an important curricular and faculty expression. It is supplementing (and replacing in many instances) the traditional “internship.” In addition, many faculty view service-learning as a means of discovery; they research service-learning experiences and publish articles on the process and outcomes.

Service-learning is one of many contemporary examples of scholarly “boundary crossings,” ways that faculty connect—in coherent, thematic, and scholarly ways—the traditionally discrete activities of teaching, research, and service. When viewed in this way, engagement becomes a connective expression. That happens when we replace the preposition “of” (the scholarship of engagement) with the preposition “in.” When we do that, engagement becomes a cross-cutting phenomenon—engagement in teaching, in research, and in service—guided by an engagement ethos. Consider how faculty are discovering the value of engaged learning forms in the classroom, such as collaborative learning (*Bruffee 1999*). And engaged forms of inquiry, discovery, and change, such as participatory and action research (*Greenwood and Levin 1998*), are gaining popularity.

“Engaged scholars” certainly include faculty, staff, and students in service to society through the scholarship of engagement. But there is also a new breed of engaged scholar, persons whose work is defined by “engaged” forms in teaching, research, and service.

Implications for Extension

We applaud extension’s affinity for engagement and its quest to enhance the scholarly quality of its work. However, this essay emerged out of concerns we share about the ways scholarship and engagement are sometimes portrayed in extension circles. Our reactions to those discussions rekindled our interest in Schön’s interpretation of Boyer, and laid the foundation for identifying the six interrelated implications for extension we now share.

First and foremost, *the new scholarship means that extension cannot simply “hitch up to the wagon of scholarship.”* That wagon is on the move and moving in multiple directions. A vital extension needs to be part of the journey because scholarship is anything but static. Scholarship is not an “it.”

Second, *scholarship cannot be reduced to the way extension work is organized, presented, and evaluated.* Doing that reduces scholarship to a process, rendering to procedure what is inherently creative, often chaotic, and sometimes mysterious. Scholars

are generally unconcerned with developing routines to undertake and evaluate their work. They are dedicated to “the work” itself, the underlying essence of it, and less interested in such things as how well it is organized. Scholarship has never been—and certainly is not in today’s environment—a planning process. Scholarship is a “stance and dance” (*adapted from Brookfield 1995*) of deep learning.

Third, *the new scholarship challenges conventional ways of doing business*. At issue for extension is the extent to which conventional ways of thinking and doing are open and available for challenge and change. Is the scholarship of engagement seen as a new approach to extension programming? We hope not. A more provocative question is “How is the scholarship of engagement challenging and changing the way that extension conceives and delivers programs?” And what is the new scholarship equivalent of the word “program”?

Fourth, *the new scholarship is fundamentally about critique*. When scholars critique, they take a critical stance toward their work—engaging in dialogue and discourse—inquisitive not only about how others approach their work, but also about how *they* themselves approach their work. Scholars know that the vitality of

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any field requires critique. It is a lifeline for progress and an antidote to conventionality. For extension educators, critique means questioning why certain directions are preferred and why other alternatives are not pursued. It means having the courage to talk about experiences that did not go as well as expected. Critique is fundamental to learning. To what extent is extension open and available to critique?

Fifth, *the new scholarship is inherently a conversation about values*. Today, values are at the forefront, and we believe that it is essential for extension to be in the vanguard of conversations about values in engagement. Doing that will invariably stimulate conversations about matters that are often “off the table.” For example, although some view engagement primarily in terms of making knowledge resources available for problem solving, others see it differently. Alternative interpretations share a common root, focusing attention on the questions “Engagement *with whom?*” and “Engagement *toward what end?*” Those embracing a social justice perspective, for instance, believe that public higher education must

make a greater and more pronounced effort to invest resources in the people and communities "left behind." And there are scholars, such as Patricia Cranton (1998), who question the volume and strength of higher education partnerships with clientele. Cranton fears that university partnerships are exacerbating higher education's standing as a "delivery system" and wonders if today's higher education has become a subsidized arm of special interest groups.

And, *finally, the new scholarship means taking stands based on convictions.* That invariably means speaking out in ways that run counter to "the company line." Recently in this journal, Cornell's Scott Peters (2000) actually made a case against engagement in some forms. He raised serious questions about engagement that is undertaken for instrumental purposes. "Unless engagement is tied to a commitment to place social, political, and moral aims on the table as serious and legitimate concerns for scholarly work," Peters wrote, "the 'engaged institution' idea might simply reinforce the procedural, service-oriented politics of the default mode, i.e., instrumental individualism." With that, Peters made a case for what he calls "public scholarship" that "explicitly incorporates deliberations on questions of civic purpose, while also providing opportunities for serious, substantial contributions and participation from a wide variety of people." In essence, Peters makes a case for communicative and emancipatory engagement.

As extension steps up to meet the challenges of engagement as it is interpreted through the lens of the new scholarship, its administrators, faculty, staff, and campus and community collaborators, as well as financial supporters, will need to make choices. We hope that they will consider the value of participating actively in discourse about the "new" scholarship and its connection to engagement. We hope there will be ongoing and deep conversations, including critique, about scholarly engagement as it is being practiced in extension. We hope there will be numerous and continuing connective opportunities university-wide with colleagues about the scholarship of engagement that, now more than ever, suffuses our universities and communities. And, finally, we hope that extension will collaborate with partners, on campus and off—to align systems (including recruitment, professional development, accountability, and funding systems) to support engaged work that cuts across the spectrum of teaching, research, and service.

Final Thoughts

We owe much to Ernest Boyer and, perhaps, even more to Donald Schön. The new scholarship is not an “it,” to be understood uniformly and practiced in a singular way. The new scholarship—and engagement as one of its expressions—can transform higher education and magnify the societal contributions it makes.

Is that happening? From the very first time we heard about “the scholarship of engagement”—then reading about it and discussing it with colleagues—we felt its transformative power. Yet, over time, we have felt underwhelmed by higher education’s response. It’s not so much that higher education has failed to “come to the table” and engage. It was more the ways in which higher education has sought to engage and how it often goes about the change process.

The initial glimmer of understanding came when a colleague of ours, a person who is undeniably an “engaged scholar,” told us that emerging institutional initiatives about engagement around the country did not “speak” to him and to many of his colleagues. He and they felt excluded, believing that their work—work that they had been doing for years—was not valued. As we evaluated this episode, we realized that their engagement work was anything but an expression of technical rationality. It was, indeed, illustrative of the new scholarship.

As our swimmer glides on, the surface is deceptively smooth. She knows deeply, and understands more completely, the impact of the swirling waters below. They represent both challenge and an opportunity for continuing growth.

Note

This essay is based in part on “Boyer’s Last Words: A Critical Message Overlooked?” presented by Frank A. Fear and Richard J. Bawden at Outreach Scholarship: Learning, Discovery, and Engagement, The Pennsylvania State University, October 15, 2001.

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About the Authors

Frank A. Fear is professor of resource development and a faculty member in The Liberty Hyde Bailey Scholars Program at Michigan State University. He is a consultant to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's "Leadership for Institutional Change" initiative.

Lorilee R. Sandmann is associate vice president for public service and outreach at the University of Georgia. She is also co-director of the East/West Clearinghouse for the Scholarship of

Engagement funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (on the Web at <http://www.ScholarshipofEngagement.org>).