

Coming to critical engagement: An autoethnographic exploration. Fear, F., Rosaen, C., Bawden, R., & Foster-Fishman, P. (2006). Lanham, MD: University Press of America. ISBN-10: 07618-3471-0

Nestled amongst case studies, guidebooks for working with community, and strategic plans to institutionalize engagement, sits this thought provoking book examining critical engagement. Engagement is initially presented as a descriptor for activities undertaken by scholars, students, and administrators in higher education. These activities are linked to serving the public interest by collaborating with communities “as partners in enhancing community quality of life” (p. xi). This will resonate with those involved in engagement activities such as community-service learning, participatory research, and community-based research, to name a few. From this starting point, the authors construct an understanding and conceptual model for critically engaged scholarship developed through an exploration of their own engagement practices. That this book emerged from the rare “space for contemplation” (p. 2) that the authors created as a counter-space to the “academic assembly line” (p. 2) speaks to the central theme of the text: for engaged scholarship to realize its transformative potential, the movement needs to shift from an administratively lead instrumental discourse concerned with outputs and measurement to a scholarly critical discourse founded on a logic of inclusion. The space, time and support for this kind of endeavor are difficult to find amongst the pressures of academe and as a result the transformative potential of engagement is at risk of being usurped by the organizational priorities of administrative elites whose voice has dominated the discourse on engagement to date (p. 16).

Grounding their understanding in hermeneutics and conversation, the authors suggest that the dominant discourse on engaged scholarship is one of institutional reform that is based on an instrumentalism that reflects the modernist culture of higher education. The discourse of faculty, which asks critical questions about the purpose of engagement, why it is undertaken and who benefits, is being overwhelmed by an “*administrative discourse*” (p. 16) promulgated by elites in higher education who speak about engagement from an institutional perspective. The administrative discourse is problematic in that it is seen by the authors as “*instrumental, reformist, and structural* in rhetoric and practice” (p. 17). Questions of organizational support for engaged scholarship, measuring and rewarding this activity, and securing funding, dominate discussions on the topic and reflect a reformist approach of fixing and re-energizing the structures of educational institutions. This “misleads us into believing that enhancing and advancing engagement is an organizational development matter” (p. 17).

On the contrary, argue the authors, engagement is a lived experience that is expressed by what it means to be and feel engaged: a deeply personal expression with others in a shared pursuit that is transformative (p. 4). It is likened to Ray and Anderson’s (2000) notion of the cultural creative, in that the mindsets of authenticity, engaged action, whole-process learning, a social and social justice orientation and an attention to inner development, among other attributes

(p. 11), are embraced by the engaged scholar. Engagement takes place at the “engagement interface” (p. 99) which is, at essence, a space of transformative learning.

Criticality is central to the author’s conception of engagement and it is here that they distinguish themselves most markedly from much of the published literature on the topic. They see engagement as a moral and ethical commitment, a stance that is grounded in strongly held values, while recognizing that there are other approaches to engagement reflecting different values (p. 13). Refusing to pit one against the other, the authors embrace multiple practices. The point is not to do engagement their way, but to approach engagement in a critical scholarly manner. The balancing of a clear articulation of the engagement experience and conceptualizations that result from it with the recognition of other, equally legitimate experiences and conceptualizations is a tension that runs through the text, a tension that speaks to the heart of the argument. For the authors, engagement includes openness to a diversity of perspectives on the issue at hand, and a critical questioning of all of those perspectives. It is a commitment to listen in order to understand and ask questions in order to clarify, not an approach whereby already held positions are defended. It is an exploration with others, a collective learning project that takes place in a context of “reciprocal empowerment” (p. 172).

Engagement of this sort is needed, the authors argue, because communities and universities are grappling with highly complex issues that defy neat categories and boundaries. The author’s focus on community inherent in this argument is a trademark of engagement practices across the spectrum and links their insistence on critical dialogue with pragmatic ends. It is not difficult to accept that complex issues, such as environmental degradation, for example, cannot be addressed using old methods of interaction. They write:

The central theme of our argument is that novel issues deserve innovative ideas and treatments, and that includes innovative interpretations and formulations of scholarly engagement itself. (p. 180)

Holding on to the role of faculty as expert will only reproduce that same dynamic that has not yet proved fruitful in addressing these complex issues. A new approach is needed, one that does not result in a colonization of the lifeworld or a closed social hegemony but facilitates creative co-learning based on a willingness to be critically engaged in a way that includes asking reflective questions about the “way things are known and understood” (p. 188). This engagement at the level of epistemology opens the door for multiple ways of knowing and being, thereby enabling critical conversations that respect difference, yet seek common understanding.

This book is important in that it is one of the few treatments of engaged scholarship that brings to light the extent to which these practices are not simply a rebranding of extension and outreach efforts, but a significantly different way of interacting with communities. If we attend to the faculty voice speaking in and through this text, we begin to see that what is new about engagement is its focus on learning with communities, be they internal or external to the university. Shifting the faculty role from that of content or process expert approaching a

community in need, to that of co-learner participating in a collective whole requires reframing the relationship between the scholar and the community in such a way to transform the partners, as well as the way issues are understood and approached.

It is of interest that the authors, in conceptualizing scholarly engagement, call for more critical discussion about that engagement. While this sits well with my own observations about the lack of debate around the conceptual foundations of engagement in the journal articles and conference presentations on the topic, it is somewhat ironic that critical discussion, an activity commonly and traditionally associated with academics, is identified as the key to moving away from traditional academic activity. This is perhaps clarified by the authors' assertion that the engaged scholar is both reflective and active:

For us, engagement is persistent, critical, reflexive, discursive, inclusive, pluralist and democratic. It is not a matter of solving isolated problems by instrumental means – of bringing familiar mechanistic ways of *knowing* and *known* knowledge to 'familiar' problems. Rather, it is a persistent and collective endeavor focused on learning how to transform ways of living through profound and dogged participation in life itself. (p. 179)

Engagement is a work in flux that enables a constant "state of becoming" (p. 44) which cannot be divorced from critical analysis. Examples provided in the book, particularly in chapter two, are useful overall, but do not completely succeed in capturing the intricacies of this state of becoming when it is positioned within an engagement experience. More could be said to explicate and concretize the dialectical nature of becoming. This is mitigated somewhat by the authors' inclusion of a conceptual scheme (p. 231) that they hope will begin to address the lack of epistemic development necessary for praxis appropriate to critical engagement (p. 230). However, the reader is still left wanting to engage in the critical discussion that formed and informed the text. In capturing the points of agreement, the authors sometimes speak as one voice and the reader is provided with positions that could only have been the product of much interesting and rich debate. Being invited to join in this debate through its capture in the text would enrich the reader's experience and provide a more concrete understanding of the state of becoming inherent in critical engagement. That being said, the book is a must read for engaged scholars and emerging scholars of engagement who will be challenged and stimulated by its critical approach to the topic at hand.

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