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IN POINT OF PRACTICE

The Engaged University: Where Rhetorical Theory Matters

James W. Hikins & Richard A. Cherwitz

This essay contends that engagement, a productive coupling of the academy's intellectual resources with the enterprise of generating solutions to current real-world challenges, can best flourish when its theoretical foundations rest upon rhetorical perspectivism. We examine the current movement in academe toward engagement and problems attendant to its implementation, present a solution to these shortcomings in the concept of "intellectual entrepreneurship," offer "rhetorical perspectivism" as a constructive theoretical framework for grounding intellectual entrepreneurship's philosophy of education, and illustrate with an example the advantages of applying rhetorical perspectivism to the project of engagement. Rhetorical perspectivism, we argue, unites "thinking" (reflection) and "doing" (action), enabling scholars to leverage knowledge for social good.

Keywords: Engagement; Intellectual Entrepreneurship; Interdisciplinary Research; Rhetorical Perspectivism; Rhetoric as Epistemic

Colleges and universities in the twenty-first century are increasingly committed to "engagement." Engagement initiatives seek a productive coupling of the academy's intellectual resources with the enterprise of generating solutions to current real-world challenges. Yet, despite widespread agreement on their nobility, convincing faculty and administrators to fully implement engagement programs has proven difficult. The paradox of engagement initiatives' disappointing record leaves us to consider how intellectual capital produced by the academy might be better invested to promote effective civic action, and how the discipline of communication might serve that cause.

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This essay contends that engagement can best flourish when its theoretical foundations rest upon rhetorical perspectivism—a theory that has framed our research program for over three decades. The following pages: examine the current movement in academe toward “engagement” and problems attendant to its implementation; present a solution to these shortcomings in the concept of “intellectual entrepreneurship;” offer “rhetorical perspectivism” as a productive theoretical framework for grounding intellectual entrepreneurship’s philosophy of education; and illustrate with an example the advantages of applying rhetorical perspectivism to the project of engagement.

Engagement and Its Contemporary Shortcomings

Engagement remains but a partially fulfilled vision on college and university campuses for several reasons. First, engagement is a disarmingly simple term concealing an enormously complex set of issues. Whether a large university or a small liberal arts college, multiple departments as diverse as chemistry and philosophy embrace multifarious goals, interests, policies, traditions, and rituals, thus mitigating against coordinated engagement with the world beyond the campus gates.

Effective engagement is also hampered by the perceived lack of requisite infrastructure. To date, one solution to this problem has been to enlarge the institution’s organizational chart, adding and staffing centers or offices. This, of course, only exacerbates the problem of administrative complexity.

Other vexing issues include assessment, incentive, and reward structures. How might contributions to engagement translate into release time, course loads, research demands, administrative burdens, and compensation levels? How will the success or failure of engagement be assessed? Attention to these exigencies soon reaches a point of diminishing returns: The success of engagement initiatives becomes inversely proportional to traditional administrative efforts to make them work, inhibiting the goal of joining the interests of the academy with those of the community.

The greatest obstacle to engagement is the culture of the academy. Institutions of higher learning are still organized on the model of the independent academic unit, headed by a department chair, a model rooted in the history and evolution of discrete, insulated disciplines. Thus, some departments view themselves as legitimately less concerned with engagement, believing “service” means involvement in disciplinary associations.

Such an attitude becomes particularly pernicious when engagement is centralized in a program, center, or office, making it far too easy to shift the burden of engagement programs away from academic units. As Cherwitz and Hartelius have observed, all the aforementioned issues are then viewed as “logistical,” and only exacerbate “longstanding cultural obstacles preventing engagement” (2006, p. 49). Separation, partition, detachment, and autonomy are obstacles to engagement. Successful engagement requires convergence, collaboration, and approaches that find unity in diversity. Such approaches can best be implemented through intellectual entrepreneurship.

Intellectual Entrepreneurship

Intellectual entrepreneurship is a philosophy and vision of education that views academics as innovative agents of change. It focuses on creating transdisciplinary and multi-institutional collaborations designed to produce intellectual advancements that provide solutions to society's problems and needs. Intellectual entrepreneurship is academic engagement for the purpose of changing lives. It refocuses the mission of institutions of higher learning: Advancing the frontiers of knowledge and preparing tomorrow's leaders is directed toward economic and social development. The role of faculty and students then evolves from that of "intellectual provocateur" to becoming what might be called an "intellectual entrepreneur" (Beckman & Cherwitz, 2009).

The creation of material wealth is one expression of entrepreneurship, but at a more profound level entrepreneurship is an attitude for engaging the world (Cherwitz & Darwin, 2005; Cherwitz & Sullivan, 2002). Intellectual entrepreneurs take risks and seize opportunities, discover and create knowledge, innovate, collaborate, and solve problems in any number of social realms: corporate, nonprofit, government, and education. They understand that genuine collaboration between universities and the public is more than "knowledge transfer" or increased "access" to the academy's intellectual assets. Collaboration demands mutual humility and respect, joint ownership of learning, and cocreation of innovation—qualities that move universities well beyond the typical elitist sense of "service," and far beyond the paternalistic notion of "outreach." Knowledge, after all, involves integration of theory, practice, and production, a goal not well represented by typical service or outreach projects (Cherwitz & Hartelius, 2006).

In sum, intellectual entrepreneurship seeks a reconceptualization of what it is to be a member of the academy. It calls into question the long-held view that the scholar is an intellectual who views education, training, and focus as an insulated issue or set of issues, principally or exclusively for the sake of accumulating knowledge within disciplinary confines. In place of this traditional model, intellectual entrepreneurship conceptualizes scholarship as a process generating intellectual capital, not disciplinary knowledge—capital most wisely invested in a diversified portfolio of activities. Developing such a portfolio involves the predisposition to link one's work with the interests of one or more communities, cultures, or cocultures.

This predisposition to think more holistically is urgently needed because pressing contemporary problems transcend the boundaries of traditional disciplines. Their multidimensional causality and wide-spectrum effects blur or erase sharp distinctions in so-called areas of expertise. Problem solvers are required to be more than "experts." They must be "critical holists," endowed with the skills and knowledge enabling them to assess, understand, and intervene to solve complex exigencies.

The sort of problem solver we have in mind has the ability to negotiate the boundaries among and between disciplines. They understand the multiple interfaces joining academic and nonacademic stakeholders, and they are well prepared to address concerns at the margins of these interfaces, including social, cultural, and

ethical dimensions. What single discipline could effectively identify, evaluate, and ameliorate the problem of a collapsing economy, global warming, a looming pandemic, overpopulation, or deforestation? With regard to regional issues, what single scholarly literature could be applied to enlighten our understanding of, and solution to, urban decay or poverty?

Even local issues, such as a project's immediate environmental or social impact, or other decisions concerning land use, demand for their solution *an integrated aggregation of broad expertise, not an aggregation of experts*. Also needed is the wisdom to apply such expertise for the greater good. These requirements invite us to conceptualize problems and their solutions as a complex matrix, whose interrelationships and synergies are not likely to be understood or resolved by the application of self-contained disciplinary knowledge. When we are enjoined to consider a more catholic understanding of both problems and solutions, the result is more effective intervention.

Effective intervention necessitates a special variety of transdisciplinary understanding, one that applies a species of expertise that most scholars have never been trained in, or have been *trained out of*. We have in mind here something like that to which Kenneth Burke (1954, pp. 7–9) refers when he borrows from Thorstein Veblen (1914) the concept of “trained incapacity.” Like Burke, we can imagine “that state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as blindness”—where the expertise of the specialist obfuscates the capacity to see solutions that are more manifest from holistic purviews (p. 7). By contrast, we can imagine the intellectual entrepreneur, invested not merely in disciplinary knowledge, but in an accumulated and integrated portfolio of more comprehensive expertise. Such a portfolio enables the intellectual entrepreneur to more competently assess the oftentimes interdependent multiple antecedent causality, and consequent synergy generating and sustaining contemporary issues.

Of course, the expertise to which we refer is quite distinct from what is typically imagined when one calls to mind the application of particular specialties to an issue. But to be clear, we are not suggesting that persons with generalized and superficial knowledge replace scholars or other participants with specific and “deep” expertise in particular fields. Rather, we are suggesting that specialists must have a wider understanding of issues than is typical. They must be more conscious of their interconnections with other domains of interest relevant to a particular problem, transcending the autonomy of disciplines as they engage the interests of stakeholders.

Optimally, engagement requires an amalgamation of intellectual entrepreneurship with the interests of particular cultures and cocultures. Only then can the trained incapacity and “self-protecting domains of vested interest and social power” that accompany disciplinary interests be minimized (Bazerman, 1992, p. 64). Then, solutions can be applied to problems with the kind of practical wisdom Aristotle (1908) described in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a joint product of wisdom (*sophia*) and prudence (*phronesis*). What “course of study” transcends the confines of disciplinary training to cultivate such practical wisdom? The answer, we suggest, is “rhetorical

perspectivism”—a theory grounding our vision of engagement and intellectual entrepreneurship.

Rhetorical Perspectivism

We formulated the theory of rhetorical perspectivism in response to the claim, spreading throughout the academy in the late twentieth century, that discourse, including rhetoric, should enjoy *epistemic* status. That is to say, discourse should not be seen as merely reporting or embellishing the insights of the arts and sciences; instead, discourse plays a central role in *discovering* those insights (Cherwitz & Hikins, 1983, 1986). Some even suggested that discourse *creates* “reality” (Brummett, 1976). The following paragraphs provide the theoretical context for these views.

The contention that rhetorical discourse does much more than “add impulse to truth”—that rhetoric creates truth, if not reality itself—advanced from several directions in the twentieth century. In political economy, Benedetto Croce responded, in his introduction to Vilfredo Pareto’s classic “scientific” *Manual of Political Economy*, with the exclamation: “As if even the Manuel of M. Pareto were not a tissue of conceptions and of words! Man thinks by means of conceptions and expresses them by means of words!” (Pareto, 1971, p. 10, n. 9). In linguistics, the Sapir-Whorff hypothesis contended that, because we think in language, our reality must be essentially linguistic (Whorff, 1956). In sociology, Charles Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) observed that linguistic interaction made it *appear* that reality itself was a product of social construction. And, in rhetoric, the work of Robert Scott (1967, 1976) laid the foundations in our field for a lively discussion of the manner and degree to which rhetoric can be conceived as “a way of knowing.”

As epistemic theories of rhetoric evolved, they found allies in the critical tradition, a tradition itself thoroughly seated in concerns of human symbol use and language. As early as 1967, Guy Debord argued that we are enmeshed in a “negation of life” that smothers us within a spectacle of swirling images that are representations, not reality (Section 15). Scholars since Debord, influenced significantly by epistemic doctrines in the language arts, contributed the notion that, by conceiving rhetoric as a *doxastic* (opinion-creating) enterprise, rather than an *epistemic* (knowledge-creating) endeavor, one can better assay how “symbols come to possess power—what they ‘do’ in society as contrasted to what they ‘are’” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 104).

As the foregoing etiology attests, the view that discourse plays a role in knowledge about reality, if not reality creation itself, has undergone considerable metamorphosis. Scott’s original view that “rhetoric is epistemic” has become considerably more nuanced. Yet, the theme remains ubiquitous in rhetoric and associated literatures (Adler, 2004; Banning, 2005; Bishop & Phillips, 2006; Collier, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Fricker, 2007; Gergen, 1999; Littlefield, 2006; Schechter, 2007).

Importantly, the philosophical assumptions grounding most versions of the rhetoric as epistemic doctrine have led many theorists to conclude prematurely that all human attempts to know are subjective or intersubjective. This skeptical attitude is pervasive in rhetorical studies. The claim prevalent among undergraduates,

that “We all view the world differently,” is the naïve and largely unphilosophical counterpart of the rhetoric as epistemic literature, as are assertions such as “My truth is my truth, yours is yours, and neither is more privileged than the other.” The argument is: Because everyone has a unique perspective, there can be no human-independent, nonperspectival truths.

Our theory of rhetorical perspectivism contends that these currently fashionable views misanalyze the concept of perspective. Far from signaling subjectivism or skepticism, our theory accounts for the uniqueness of human perspectives without embracing subjectivism or skeptical versions of intersubjectivism. To understand why, and to make the link between rhetorical perspectivism and engagement, it is necessary to clarify the fundamental ontological tenets upon which rhetorical perspectivism rests.

Following the work of Evander Bradley McGilvary (1956), we adapted the philosophical theory of perspective realism to generate the theory of rhetorical perspectivism (Cherwitz & Hikins, 1983, 1986). Like McGilvary, we hold that reality is ultimately grounded, not in material things (materialism), nor in mental or spiritual entities (idealism), but instead in a more fundamental ontological progenitor, namely—*the relation*. McGilvary postulates that “*every particular in the world [that is, every entity or thing in existence, “abstract” or “concrete”] . . . is what it is only because of its context; and every character any member has it has only by virtue of its relation to other members of that context*” (p. 17, emphasis in original). Ontologically, relations are not the result of things in the world; things in the world are generated from relations. This ontology does not deny the reality of material objects; it posits that materiality, and all else, including abstract entities and even meaning itself, emerges from relations.

McGilvary’s (1956) ontology is analogous to I. A. Richards’ (1936) contextual theory of meaning, by which meaning is not revealed in the word itself, nor is it to be found in a dictionary; rather, meaning is a function of how a word is used in context. Just as Richards believed dictionary definitions constitute the “proper meaning superstition” when it came to the meaning of words, so the notion that a thing is comprised of autonomous, discrete, unconnected physical “stuff” (atoms, subatomic particles, etc.) we call the “physicalist superstition.”

Recent groundbreaking work in the philosophy of consciousness by Alva Noë in many ways is consistent with the views we have been considering. Noë (2009) concludes: “Meaning is relational.” He continues: “[T]he relation itself thanks to which our thoughts and ideas and images are directed to events, people, and problems in the world is the fact of our being embedded in and our dynamic interaction with the things around us” (p. 164). Noë’s remarks about relations, though not as developed as those in our theory of rhetorical perspectivism, seem consistent with the theory and amplify our belief in the inherent interconnectedness of all that exists.

A corollary to this relational interconnectedness is that relations propagate ever more complex and causally efficacious systems. Among these systems is consciousness, which McGilvary (1956) explains as follows:

Consciousness, a natural event, occurs in the course of natural events when and only when an organism is physically reacting to physical stimulation from without or from within itself; and it is analyzable (but not separable) into a character ("conscious character") of a specific kind and a corresponding asymmetrical non-dynamic relation also of a specific kind ("conscious relation"). So long as any consciousness lasts, its constituent character is a character of the reacting organism: "the organism is conscious"; and its constituent relation is a relation which the organism has to something or other: "the organism is conscious of that something or other." (p. 47, emphasis in original)

McGilvary's ontology contains the building blocks of a rhetorical epistemology substantially different from those of other scholars. The idea, implicit in McGilvary's analysis of the relation, that everything is interconnected, not just casually, but inherently or ontologically, coupled with the contention that consciousness itself is a higher order, emergent phenomenon, gives us the machinery to explain how rhetoric generates knowledge. At the same time, it permits us to see how this knowledge is knowledge, not of mere rhetorical creations, but frequently of aspects of the world that are largely independent of our attitudes, beliefs, values, and communication constructs.

Relationality accounts for how the world is interconnected, as undergraduates intuit—not interconnected mechanically in the macroworld, but interconnected ontologically at the level of the microworld. A moment's reflection reveals why mechanical connection is dependent on ontological connection: Without the latter, the former would be impossible. This relational analysis of connectedness makes clear precisely how perspectivism (both its philosophical and rhetorical variants) productively contributes to the project of engagement. We shall now discuss this contribution.

Rhetorical Perspectivism and Engagement

When knowledge and reality are held to be a function of discourse—as, at best, *representations* of phenomena—there can be no criteria to resolve problems beyond the interests of cocultures, including the provincial cocultures of academic disciplines. Without such criteria, solutions to real-world problems can never avoid disciplinary and ideological obfuscations that inhibit successful engagement initiatives (Cherwitz & Hartelius, 2006). Alternatively, if the ontology of our theory of rhetorical perspectivism is accurate, then the world is a complex of relations whose productions in the macroworld, including problematic things we seek to ameliorate through engagement, present themselves to our consciousness as aspects of the fully interconnected world. It will be appreciated that the consciousness relation between a perceiver and some aspect of the world perceived will be enormously complex. Each aspect of a problem will be interconnected, not casually but inherently, to myriad other aspects. Nor will an aspect of an issue necessarily appear the same to any two observers, unless through communication (rhetoric) one observer brings the other to view that aspect from a similar perspective.

Herein resides the central rationale for grounding engagement in the theory of rhetorical perspectivism. Rhetorical perspectivism suggests that engagement initiatives can best succeed through the application of intellectual entrepreneurship rather than the myopic foci of particular disciplinary interests. Transdisciplinarity of the kind we are advocating mitigates socially constructed intellectual and disciplinary roadblocks. Endowed with the ability to both see beyond and connect the horizons of particular disciplines, intellectual entrepreneurs are able to bring others into their perspective to view the aspects of complex phenomena as they view them.

If communities are complex objects exhibiting dynamic, multifaceted, interacting dimensions, and if engagement holds social amelioration as a principal objective, then a cooperative multiplicity of disciplinary approaches, methods, and assessment tools is required if engagement investments are to pay significant dividends. Yet the question remains: What philosophical principles ground such efforts? What theoretical framework can best sustain them? What rationale provides a vision for future engagement initiatives? In other words, what might constitute a theory of engagement?

A theory of engagement, we believe, must make explicit that which links the interests of particular stakeholders. This includes the links between the intellectual interests of “experts” and those in the world beyond the campus whose lives are affected by engagement. These links have been obscured in a world typically characterized by the separation of *thinking* (encapsulated by the term “reflection”) from *doing* (described by the word “action”). In our ontologically interconnected world, John Campbell’s view of intellectual entrepreneurship reconnects what the last several centuries of human development have, wittingly or unwittingly, tended to separate:

Intellectual entrepreneurship seeks to reclaim for the contemporary world the oldest strain in our common intellectual tradition: the need for thought and reflection in the midst of the world of action. As the experiment of the original Greek teachers of practical affairs demonstrated, and as Plato demonstrated through his reflections on these very themes, some of the deepest problems of thought emerge from the affairs of practical life. When one brings together the demands for action and the equally unrelenting demands for reflection characteristic of the new electronic and global marketplace, the term “intellectual entrepreneur” describes a new form of union between the academy and the world and between the academy and its own deepest traditions. (cited in Cherwitz & Sullivan, 2002, p. 27)

Now if the ontological foundations and epistemological tenets of rhetorical perspectivism are sound, then Campbell’s linkage of *reflection* and *action* offers us a third domain to consider, namely, the *axiological*.

The term axiology has referred traditionally to value theory, including the philosophical study of “goodness.” Despite its widespread use, goodness is a word that eludes precise definition. Yet, when conjoined with the term “public,” as in “public good,” it becomes amalgamated with a host of aesthetic, economic, moral, and political dimensions of human existence that generally evidence themselves as

choices worthy of consideration. These various choices defy segregation, intellectual or practical. They are, like a Gordian knot, inextricably dependent upon one another because, as they emerge, they develop synergies, the sum total of which cannot be reduced to individual elements or “threads” in the “knot.” In the ontology of perspectivism, qualities emerge as a function of relationality. In the epistemology grounding rhetorical perspectivism, those qualities can be ascertained, employed in discourse to enable various stakeholders to appraise them from their unique but sharable perspectives, and marshaled symbolically to persuade a diversity of interested and affected populations.

Significant real-world problems are much like the knot. Only some threads comprising them are socially constructed, although socially constructed ideas may impose themselves in ways both helpful and not helpful to prospective solutions. The most efficacious solutions will be those that recognize the potential for *real* emergent characteristics in complex phenomena and separate out those aspects that are real from those that are not by the application of a richly endowed perspectivist rhetoric.

In an effort to illustrate how intellectual entrepreneurship, engagement, and rhetorical perspectivism apply to contemporary problems, we turn to a subject where academic scholarship and research have become thoroughly amalgamated with vitally important community issues. It is a subject exhibiting a perspectivist rhetoric at many levels, where scholars function as intellectual entrepreneurs. We refer to human efforts to alleviate the effects of disaster. Consider the following passage from the seminal work in disaster studies of geologist David Alexander (1999):

Natural disasters, I believe, should be studied as complete entities. Over-emphasizing restricted aspects will not help us to design good mitigation strategies, for there is a strong chance of ignoring vital factors that defy classification within traditional disciplinary systems or that transcend their boundaries. Although it is fashionable to talk of interdisciplinary studies, given the magnitude of current scientific endeavors there are remarkably few of them. Undoubtedly, over-specialization and fragmentation of effort have inhibited the growth of disaster research as an autonomous field and have restricted the development of theory. (p. xv)

Unlike many of the issues confronting scholars and researchers within the confines of the academy, the study and mitigation of disaster knows no academic, socio-economic, geographic, or ideological boundaries. It is typical of the kind of issue that intellectual entrepreneurs who are prepared to advance the *transdisciplinary* understanding of a complex issue with emergent characteristics are best equipped to treat. Experts in any academic field who wish to understand and ameliorate the effects of human disaster must be cognizant too of a range of social phenomena attendant to calamity.

Happily, given the implications to human life and property, disaster research has recognized this transdisciplinary requirement. The National Research Council (2006), for example, has lauded the contributions made to disaster research by the efforts of Gilbert White: “White championed interdisciplinary research and

established collaborative hazards research projects with colleagues from other disciplines” (p. 324). The disciplines now engaged in disaster research are as diverse as geography, sociology, economics, and psychology. In *Facing Hazards and Disasters: Understanding Human Dimensions*, the National Research Council, while focusing primarily on social science dimensions of disaster, called for significantly expanding approaches to its study through “disciplinary, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary research . . .” (p. 386).

Contemporary work in disaster studies illustrates well our contention that engagement requires a more holistic understanding of issues on the part of academicians than has been the case historically. Alexander (1999) laments the fact that, in past disaster research, “emphasis has been placed firmly on technological perspectives . . .” He argues that “[a] social component is required: in fact, the success or failure of mitigation programs will be strongly influenced by people’s perceptions of the threat of disaster and how to adjust to it, and by the organization and cultural make-up of society” (p. 612). These ideas join where the disciplinary expertise of academic specialties must be translated into the management of real-world disaster. Alexander appears to believe similarly when he writes that “the study of disasters must involve the physical, technological, economic, and social (not to forget the *perceptual*) realities, and the absence of any one of these may compromise the level of understanding achieved in the other categories” (p. xvi). Alexander’s is a clear statement of what is required for engagement initiatives to work. It includes the multidimensional—perspective-laden—requirements that demand attention if engagement initiatives are to succeed. Consonant with rhetorical perspectivism, it does so within the context of a “fully rounded appreciation” of the “realities” confronting all stakeholders, recognizing that many of the most significant problems we confront are not constructed through discourse (p. xvi).

Conclusion

Our thesis is that engagement flourishes when grounded in the theory of rhetorical perspectivism. Such a realist theory of rhetoric enables intellectual entrepreneurs to be engaged by placing all stakeholders in positions to *reflect* and *act* on the various aspects of complex social problems. “I know therefore I must act” becomes the scholarly mantra. As we have argued, rhetorical perspectivism offers the academy a useful method for bringing together and integrating disparate fields whose particular specializations, and unique discourse communities, frequently act to inhibit interdisciplinary cooperation and problem solving. It also provides a mechanism for the invention and disposition of a rhetoric of social amelioration—one motivating scholars to join cooperatively with other nonacademic stakeholders to solve local and global problems. Put simply, engagement initiatives will be most productive when communication reveals the interrelationships between human interests and the nonsymbolic world in which we reside. Rhetorical perspectivism is advantageously, if not uniquely, positioned to achieve this goal.

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