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The Dorothy Doctrine of Engaged Scholarship: The Rhetorical Discipline “Had It All Along”

E. Johanna Hartelius & Richard A. Cherwitz

What is “engaged scholarship”? For rhetoricians, the concept necessarily entails mutual implication, each term ringing hollow without the other. From the classical theories of rhetoric’s role in the polis to the twentieth century’s formative debates in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, the disciplinary preoccupation with engagement is omnipresent—and for good reason. We offer in this essay a definition of engagement as “mobilized expertise.” Explicating the centrality of engagement to rhetoric as a productive practice, hermeneutics, theory, and scholarly community, we contend that (1) the particular forms of engagement necessarily are multiple, (2) the engaged rhetorical scholar cannot operate in isolation from other academic and non-academic stakeholders, and (3) a robust understanding of engagement precludes a rigid distinction between “basic” and “applied” research. Engaged scholarship in rhetoric integrates theory, practice, and production. It is inter- and cross-disciplinary, igniting and facilitating a dialectic between the generalist and the specialist.

Definitions

Engagement is the strategic leveraging of a scholar’s intellectual capital in the interest of local, national, and global communities and publics. It engenders solutions to a wide range of real and pressing social challenges. Engagement means being a “citizen-scholar.” At once a political commitment and a scholarly obligation, engagement has always been principal to rhetoric. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, the discipline of rhetoric “had it all along.” From its inception, rhetoric’s primary objective has been the integration, rather than segregation, of theory, practice, and production. For the art of situated and practical reason, whose purpose is a fitting response to social exigencies and the engineering of human action, the significance and inevitability of engagement is evident.

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Two of the five “offices” of the familiar rhetorical canon demonstrate instructively the centrality of engagement to the discipline: invention and disposition. Whether humanistic or scientific, invention denotes a method of generating ideas. It entails creativity, discovery, and intellectual production. Moreover, it is both the moment of scholarly inspiration and the effort to realize it. Indeed the concept of invention underscores why engagement is inextricably linked to rhetoric. As the following example illustrates, scholarly expertise is mobilized when invention and engagement function in a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship.

Tim Steffensmeier completed a PhD in 2005 focusing on the productive capacity of rhetoric in community development. Drawing on ancient rhetorical theory and pedagogy, and importing insights regarding innovation and problem solving from such production-oriented fields as architecture and design, he identified opportunities for rhetoricians to contribute to the project of rural rejuvenation.¹ As a faculty member at Kansas State University, Steffensmeier pursues these opportunities in dozens of communities who are rebuilding the public square. Although his relationship with the organization Public Square Communities, LLC, began with ambitions for a book, it evolved organically into a collaboration wherein Steffensmeier facilitates community dialogue, directs members to regional resource providers, and documents participants’ deliberative processes. In Sheridan County, Kansas, Steffensmeier conducted interviews, the analysis of which prompted community-wide conversations: representatives of human services, education, government, and business spent an evening discussing their aspirations. These conversations, in turn, resulted in a multi-year project to build the public square.²

Steffensmeier’s dual roles—in the community and as a rhetorician—are necessarily intertwined, reinforcing, and mutually informative. The community conversations provide the rhetorical framework and relational dynamic to move forward with local goals. After several years, Steffensmeier still interacts regularly with representatives as they coordinate five action teams and host community conversation as an inventive resource. As he notes, when wielded strategically, the rhetorical arts serve as invaluable training for engaging and mobilizing democratic communities to make progress on complex issues. At the same time, Steffensmeier’s experience with communities produces a unique rhetorical curriculum and contemporary theory of invention. Engagement brings a level of insight to his scholarship that otherwise would be unavailable. Thus, the most intellectually innovative invention is characterized by a predisposition toward engagement, and the most effective engagement initiatives are anchored to rigorous scholarly invention.

Beyond the invention of scholarship and community practices, Steffensmeier’s undertakings as an engaged rhetorician highlight the significance of disposition, or arrangement. In the classical canon, “disposition” comprises much more than a mechanical outlining of topics and arguments; it is the function of careful consideration of connections among ideas, agents, and discourses. For example, serving as a moderator during community conversations, Steffensmeier negotiates a multitude of potentially conflicting interests, interlocutors, motives, and arguments. This process of arranging perspectives and voices, allowing them to interact

productively, requires an analytic capacity for discerning priorities. Further, as one who advises community representatives on meeting concrete needs by turning to regional resource providers, Steffensmeier builds relationships. The point is simple but powerful: Disposition in the context of scholarly writing means the arrangement of claims in relation to argumentative evidence; disposition in the context of engagement means the exploration of relationships between community members and those who serve them, between scholars and the surrounding community, between scholars and students, and so on. Effective and enduring engagement initiatives are the result of scholars' recognition of a personal connection to their labor—whether the product of that labor is delivered in an academic or non-academic venue, or both.

To summarize our argument: Despite recent attention given to the idea of engagement by university administrations, funding agencies, policymakers, and others, it hardly can be characterized as trendy. What our brief discussion of invention and disposition reveals is that rhetoric historically and inherently has been about the fusion of thought (scholarship) and action (engagement). Moreover, the terminus of our argument about invention and disposition is that “engaged scholars,” whatever their discipline, understand the importance of thinking rhetorically; this, of course, does not necessitate their being rhetoricians. Similarly, engaged rhetoricians have substantive expertise outside of rhetoric. This point resonates with the discussion between Gorgias and Polus in Plato's dialogue as well as Cicero's claim in *De Inventione* regarding the challenge of being a good rhetorician.

To be clear, we do not presume to reduce rhetoric to the canons of invention and disposition alone. To the contrary, while spatial limitations preclude a more extensive treatment of the significance of the other three canons to our case study, such a discussion would certainly be enlightening. Steffensmeier's work as an engaged rhetorician exemplifies the value of style and delivery in compelling ways. His reliance on the effectiveness of different aesthetic performances in a variety of contexts for multiple audiences further illustrates the relevance of the canon as a cluster. We focus on invention and disposition in this essay because they poignantly make the case for an inherent connection between rhetoric and engagement.

The Perils of Engagement as a “Buzzword”

While applauding the efforts made by colleges and universities around the country to explore what a genuine commitment to engagement would entail, we are concerned about the difficulties encountered when attempting implementation. In part, such difficulties may be a function of well-intending university administrators' tendency to proceed prematurely toward logistics. Enthralled by the current momentum of the engagement discourse and the fundability of related initiatives, campus planners often rush to create delivery mechanisms without further reflection. This, we insist, is a potentially counterproductive practice for the larger academic community. Dwelling too much on the alleged “newness” or “buzz” concerning engagement,

we insist, is imprudent. Moreover, the misperception that engagement is a novelty puts the discipline of rhetoric at risk of several forms of “othering.”

First, viewing engagement as a novelty perpetuates and reifies the powerful schism existing in institutional reward structures between “basic” research (with its focus on theory and the generation of academic knowledge) and engagement (what often is described reductively as “applied research” or “service”). To integrate engagement successfully into the academic culture requires acknowledgement that engagement is an intrinsic part and necessary extension of intellectual curiosity. As demonstrated by our faculty example, methodological rigor and the production of theory go hand in hand with the impetus to mobilize one’s expertise in the community’s interest. If engagement is a new and additional academic undertaking, then it likely is something to which only tenured faculty can “afford” to devote time and energy. As long as the standard practices of tenure and promotion remain “abacus oriented,” junior faculty have little choice but to play along, amassing as many traditional “vita hits” as possible. By contrast, if engagement is viewed as mobilized expertise—integral to the academic enterprise as a whole (including *all* of the tasks currently subsumed within the research-teaching-service metrics)—then an alternative model for assessing faculty is possible; collaborating with other faculty and the community to tackle social problems would be rewarded and encouraged.

The language of engagement, therefore, must establish the inherent connections among the discovery, propagation, and use of knowledge. It is our contention that allowing engagement to be a separate outcome dooms it to a peripheral status: it will be perceived as non-academic, less rigorous, and of insignificant scholarly value. By contrast, if engagement is a matter of ownership and self-efficacy—as illustrated by Steffensmeier’s work—it may be executed and deliberately produced as an intrinsic part of a scholarly agenda. Thus viewed, engagement becomes a factor in faculty negotiations surrounding release time, course loads, research demands, administrative burdens, compensation levels, and other coins of the academic realm.

Second, viewing engagement as an academic fad risks oversimplifying the distinction between on- and off-campus problem solving. This marginalizes the expertise and ventures of non-academic professionals; couched as something new and distinct from scholarship, engagement becomes overly paternalistic, obscuring the dialogue between academics and non-academics necessary to solve society’s most serious challenges—problems that cannot be solved by any isolated sector. Antiquated models of engagement characterized by the hierarchical language of “knowledge transfer,” “service learning,” “outreach,” and “access” underestimate the value of non-academic knowledge and yet-to-be-imagined partnerships. It is a debilitating myth that professionals in the community await solutions from academics, that is, that those on-campus are “thinkers” while those off-campus are “doers.” Genuine problem solving requires mutual humility, joint ownership, and collaborative innovation—something made more onerous when engagement is portrayed as categorically separate from scholarship.

Questions

The forum editors pose a series of compelling questions. Drawing on our definition of engagement as mobilized expertise, we respond briefly. First, *what form should engagement take?* Our answer—which no doubt will frustrate some readers—must be this: it depends. The most effective engaged rhetorical scholars are sensitive to context, noting and addressing the needs of the multiple and sometimes competing communities and publics to which they themselves belong. That is why policies and logistics defining and governing the forms of engagement cannot be determined a priori, but should emerge organically from particular cases. Our “it depends” answer emphasizes the uniqueness of specific examples of engagement—consonant with the situatedness of rhetoric—rather than an administrative impulse to implement and enforce uniform policies.

Second, *whom should scholars engage?* The answer: stakeholders. Engaged scholars recognize that academics are not the only experts and that teachers are not the only ones with valuable lessons. There are natural stakeholders for various kinds of research spread across a university campus and within the community at large. In view of the complexity of challenges facing society, the notion that academic researchers exclusively provide answers to “real world” problems is absurd. Engagement demands the abandonment of an all too familiar *modus operandi*.

For example, while interdisciplinary and on- and off-campus collaborations already thrive, the real challenge for engaged scholarship is discerning the unimagined possibilities. Such initiatives move beyond the predictable, inviting scholars to collaborate with non-academics. By accepting this invitation, we will discover how rhetoric (sometimes thought of as purely theoretical and limited to the realm of “elite” politics) can embrace its classical heritage, responding to local as well as global needs. Imagine, for instance, a research project on sustainable development involving rhetoricians, ecologists, economists, engineers, and urban planners—one that produces both academic knowledge and public policy. Society’s most vexing issues, including sustainable environmentalism, require cross-disciplinary collaborations—not because such partnerships are in vogue, but because without them, solutions remain unattainable. The purpose of engagement is not simply to “be political,” as traditionally defined, but to respond to the problems faced by local, regional, national, and international communities. To be sure, politics is part of this enterprise, perhaps even centrally. Nevertheless, ideological perspectives and obvious political leanings do not define the motives for engagement.

Third, turning attention to what is at stake in the prospect of engaged scholarship, the forum editors ask, *should we even try?* To address this question, we revisit our initial definition of engagement as leveraging intellectual capital in the *interest and welfare* of communities and publics. If engagement were defined via the traditional bifurcation of scholarship and professional work, perhaps as “applied research,” it would have no particular valence; cashing in on the practical application of academic discoveries would be optional and could be for good or ill. Defining engagement as mobilized expertise, however, reflects its centrality to the rhetorical enterprise.

The significance of this point for our discipline's identity and legitimacy cannot be overstated. Scholars, especially rhetoricians, have much to offer the world, and those contributions constitute sufficient justification for engagement. No less important, though, is the realization that if it always has been principal to the rhetorical discipline, then embracing engagement makes us rhetoricians par excellence—i.e., “more of ourselves” and more aligned with the field's rich traditions and theories. To the editors' question we emphatically reply: How could we not try? Engaged scholarship suggests mutual implication; it strengthens the legitimacy of the discipline, making us faithful to our historical calling in a socio-political context wherein humanists more than ever must demonstrate their contribution. As rhetoricians, we understand well that engagement unites the specialist's knowledge and the generalist's perspective, creating powerful synergies between discoveries and deeds. To paraphrase John Campbell, as the experiment of the original Greek rhetoricians demonstrates, the deepest problems of thought emerge from the affairs of practical life.³ The term “engagement” denotes the dialectic of action and reflection, epitomizing the union between the academy and the world as well as the tradition connecting rhetoric's past, present, and future.

Notes

- [1] Timothy Steffensmeier, “Rhetorical Invention and the Project of Becoming Local in Rural Community Rejuvenation” (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005).
- [2] See Timothy Steffensmeier, “Building a Public Square: An Analysis of Community Narratives,” *Community Development* 41 (2010): 255–68.
- [3] Richard Cherwitz and Charlotte Sullivan, “Intellectual Entrepreneurship: A Vision for Graduate Education,” *Change* (2002): 22–27.

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