

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Committing to *communitas* and *liberté*:

Connecting professional identity and engaged
scholarship.

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Communication is an examination of how we create, express, sustain and alter collective and individual ideas and identities. Today's communication scholar is presented with various contexts to explore theoretical and pragmatic issues pertaining to these issues from various perspectives. Our discipline is a part of, while also expressing the beauty and struggles associated with diverse perspectives, methods and rationales. Within this multiplicity, it is both pragmatic and all together imperative that I locate myself as an aspiring professional communication scholar, teacher, mentor and member of the community.

This personal narrative is a documentation of my professional intentions that undoubtedly shape the questions I ask about the collective and individual. In turn, these questions guide my research and how I communicate as a teacher and a writer. After reviewing current conversations about 'engaged scholarship', it is apparent that an exercise that bridges my professional identity to this topic is not only practical, but also self-reflective (see bibliography). At this point in my journey as a scholar, I am merely deciphering the meanings of engaged scholarship. In the discussion that follows, I intend to provide a personalized functional definition of engaged scholarship. In the end, more questions remain, which will help to steer my research, teaching and identity in the field of communication.

As a graduate student who is joining conversations about engaged scholarship, I am reminded of the metaphor of the Burkian parlor where we enter discussions that precede us and ranging in topics and intensity (Burke 1973). These conversations are unending, keep us up late at night and highly contextual (Burke, 1973). I am drawn to issues pertaining to ethics, the blurring of roles, approaches to and responsibilities we have as scholars (Cheney, Wilhelmsson et al. 2002; Kuhn 2002; Krizek 2005; Waldron 2007; Barge, Jones et al. 2008; Barge and Shockley-Zalabak 2008; Barge, Simpson et al. 2008; Deetz 2008; Simpson and Seibold 2008).

Although each provides a depth of perspective that a young scholar would aspire to, one is left to ascertain the direction, pace and quality of their own academic journey. In other words, the discussions about engaged scholarship present insightful retrospections and considerations for future scholarship, but from professional vantages that are not all together familiar. With that, I would believe that given where I am in my own journey, I will benefit greatly from listening, understanding and seeking to decipher the meaning of engaged scholarship.

When I reflect on the meaning of “engaged”, I am reminded of commitments, pledges and oaths. It is important to consider to whom we make these oaths, for what means and ends (Deetz 2008). Questioning these aspects gets to the heart of what we seek to know and understand because we are guided by the types of questions we ask, where, when and in relation to what. The Delving into the idea of a relationship is perhaps the most important aspect of what it means to be engaged. As human beings, we may commit to particular principles and ideals; however, such commitments are made in relation to other human beings. For example, expressing one’s commitment of marriage is not only for the individual, but also an expression to another and to a community at large.

When I reflect upon to whom or what I commit to, it is to the notion of *communitas*. This is perceived as an ideal of a relationship where each of us strive for a sense of togetherness through collective questioning and understanding. In the process of collective inquiry, we create transformative experiences that will lead us closer to ideals and expressions of social equality. These ideals are similarly expressed by Kuhn’s (2002) framing of “community of practice” where there “is a group with a common sense of purpose nested within a larger network” (p. 108). With this in mind, I am committed to a shared experience with individuals from various and multiple backgrounds and perspectives. I am committed to exploring and functioning in

luminal spaces where each of us must express humility and actively listen, while seeking to contribute valuable experiences, knowledge, methodologies and theories of practice (Turner 1969).

As for scholarship, I frame this as a process of learning that is both potentially liberating, and often characterized as a leisurely activity that is spared for a selected class. The questions we ask and the knowledge and understanding that we generate have a potential to liberate and control. Research has the capability of providing voice to and for those in need of one while also minimizing it. The ethics of such endeavors is paramount for any scholar to consider. What means, ends and whom does my research serve (Cheney, 2008)?

Scholarly inquiries require large commitments of time to an educational process that is manifested as coursework, testing, writing, discussion, argumentation, *et cetera*. These endeavors are not accessible to all in terms of time or financial constraints. Although scholarship, or learning, is theoretically accessible to all in our society, we often limit it to the confines of academia. Scholarship, I argue, may be found in all aspects of life. I see a part of my role as a scholar as “working with” the community, aiding in the process of *how* to learn, not just *what* to learn (Krizek 2005). I propose an engaged scholarship that provides us with opportunities and spaces for to learn about ourselves and each other.

At this point, my understanding of engaged scholarship is that it is a commitment, or my oath, to working with our community as we learn together. To do this, it is imperative to remain grounded, or in touch with my surroundings in such a way that what I speak of and examine as a researcher is of communal concern. Secondly, I must foster an environment or community that is learning. I believe this is best accomplished through the development of constructive, critical

thinking that is protected by freedom of speech and focused towards improving today, for tomorrow.

With these presumptions of what engaged scholarship is, my interests as a young researcher are rooted in the experience(s) of individuals or groups that are 'breaking the mold'. In my research, I often refer to this experience as "trailblazing". Ultimately, I see this as the negotiation of self-identity in relation to group identity, communal and individual expectations, and stereotypes. One context to examine this identity has been in my research of food and how Mexican-American immigrants negotiate their identity. Another, area of my research has focused on the context of how female engineers negotiate identities in relation to issues of professionalism, gender, and culture. I examine these negotiations of identity from a critical, organizational, and cultural perspective. In these explorations there are opportunities to build *communitas* and extend *liberté*.

Reflecting upon these perspectives, I am struck by the manifesto that exudes both a naiveté and sincere hope. The parlor is full of debate and argument. There are numerous discussions that instruct me to, suggest that I, call upon me to... More importantly I am filled with questions that are guided by my identity as a self-described critical, interpretive, organizational communication scholar:

- How will I work with the community at large?
- Given the constraints of our current structure of graduate study, are there opportunities to engage the community?
- Each of us is drawn to this conversation of engaged scholarship, but to whom?...where?...when?...what?...and in what contexts (Cheney, 2008)?
- What are the strategies and skills that we may use and share with others who have similar passions?

- How, as a member of the community, can I be both self-reflective and reflexive of our work so as to measure the quality of my journey of engaged scholarship?
- What are the responsibilities of mentors (current professors and researchers) in relation to graduate students and vice versa?
- In light of these many conversations and perspectives, where and how does a graduate student and young professional practice engaged scholarship with a level of proficiency and credibility that leads to respectable research?

In the end, I, like my counterparts must actually do the practice to which we commit. My participation in Aspen *is* just the beginning of a commitment to engaged scholarship and the ideals presented here.

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