

Possibilities for Engagement

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In my essay I reflect on the concept of engagement in terms of my position as a new tenure-track faculty member and my experiences in the classroom.

Engagement on the Tenure Track

As a new faculty member on the tenure track I find the concept of engaged scholarship a bit complicated, especially given the realities of the tenure and promotion process of a research university like the University of Colorado. I've heard enough warnings and anecdotes about scholarship that didn't "count" on a CV. I've also received many admonitions about the importance of making *theoretical* contributions to the *literature*, most often in the reviews I receive from journal submissions. I certainly am drawn to the academy and life as a professor in hopes of making a difference, though I readily confess that I'm going to spend most of my time and energy on scholarship that is most likely to help me earn tenure.

I know what's required of me to earn tenure and I fully agree with the importance of adding to the canons of knowledge that constitute the field of communication. However, in light of this conference's focus I cannot help but think about how the tenure process might be revised to encourage more engaged scholarship. I know that large institutional changes in tenure requirements are not likely to change soon, and that one tends to have more credibility in advocating change only upon actually earning tenure, but here are a few ideas that I've thought about over the last year or so that may have some relevance¹:

Popular Press Translation

I think it would be valuable to require some sort of popular press translation of scholarship as part of tenure evaluation. This could be in the form of research summaries that show up in places like Communication Currents, or commentary that might show up on an editorial page of a recognized periodical or trade publication. Either way, it would be interesting to see what happens if a norm developed in academia where it was taken for granted that professors found ways to translate their research for broader audiences and helped diffuse the implications of their research throughout society and local communities.

Interdisciplinary Publications

It could also be valuable to require at least one publication with a co-author outside of the discipline of communication. This is very relevant for organizational communication scholars, especially as we investigate organizational phenomena that are studied by a wide range of other disciplines (i.e., management, sociology, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, etc.).

¹ Admittedly these ideas are most relevant for faculty at research institutions and for organizational communication scholars.

Professional Research Reports

Many scholars who conduct field research in/at various organizations negotiate some sort of “deliverable” for the organization in return for allowing access. It would be nice if these reports had an important measure of value on a CV during tenure evaluation. Feedback from organizational members about the value of a research report could also play a role in tenure evaluation, not just outside letters from other scholars in the field.

It's a basic maxim of human behavior that we generally do what we are rewarded for and avoid what we are punished for. In my estimation, much of what happens in academia is the product of the rewards and punishments of the tenure process. Even after tenure, faculty are basically encouraged to continue the type of work that got them where they are, not necessarily to forge new ground (though many do).

Although this is probably a crude generalization of the tenure process, my basic point is that it would be exciting to see the idea of engaged scholarship more formally codified in the tenure process. I do pursue research projects that seem to make a difference and involve some measure of engagement, but I have to admit that right now in my career the main question I ask about a project is about its contribution towards tenure. This leads to a focus on theoretical contribution to the disciplinary literature, not necessarily the quality of engagement.

Engagement in the Classroom

Despite my ambivalence about engaged scholarship as a tenure-track faculty member, I have found some engagement success in the classroom, especially in terms of teaching courses structured around service learning.

When I was a grad student at the University of Texas I taught several sections of a group communication course that incorporated a service learning project. Basically, the students were divided into small groups and had to develop a project to assist a local nonprofit organization. I coordinated with several nonprofit organizations ahead of time to make sure this type of project would work for their organization. The only criteria for the project was that it had to have substantive value for the nonprofit organization and that at least 60% of the work had to be done as a group.

The students would meet with various executive directors and volunteer coordinators and develop a project they could reasonably accomplish and was needed by the organization. Several groups coordinated fundraising events, other groups made promotional videos and marketing materials, one group created a storage inventory system for a Goodwill outlet, another group did a number of small volunteer projects with several different nonprofit organizations and wrote a report about volunteer coordination, other groups conducted communication audits to help these organizations better understand their organizational communication practices.

The student teams gave a final presentation during exams week and their nonprofit representatives were in attendance. I was very impressed with the quality and depth of the projects, as well as how much ownership the students took in their ideas. I was very encouraged to hear the positive feedback from many of the nonprofit representatives. The student projects provided real value to their organization; they weren't just going through the motions to help the students. And the student reviews after the project were over were very insightful. Many talked about how valuable this assignment was for them, both in terms of their personal experiences and for learning about

organizational communication in the “real world.” Plus the students were exposed to parts of society that weren’t a big part of their lives, as most of these nonprofits worked with needy populations and the voiceless in society. Overall these projects were very rewarding for all parties involved.

I know many others have taught service learning courses and report similar outcomes. My point here is simply to reiterate the importance of this type of classroom experience for advancing the concept of engagement. As a discipline organizational communication is very compatible with the notion of service learning and affords students the opportunity to experience the implications of our research. As we continually explore ideas of engagement, I hope that service learning always has an integral role.

Concluding Thoughts

For me, I approach the subject of engagement with mixed emotions: drawn to the ideals of a university community making a difference in society through quality scholarship and teaching, yet also aware of the realities of the tenure evaluation process and the time constraints on classroom preparation. As I progress in my academic career, I hope the concept of “engaged scholarship” becomes a norm in academic environments and institutionalized within the incentive structures that motivate our work. We clearly have some great examples of engaged scholarship as exemplified in the readings for this conference and numerous other colleagues throughout the field. In time I hope that universities in general and communication scholars in particular are well-known for their levels of engagement and the difference they make in society.