

A Model of Engaged Learning: Frames of Reference and Scholarly Underpinnings

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Abstract

If the engagement movement is to mature, scholars need to document and share the values, beliefs, and approaches that guide their work. Otherwise, engagement efforts will be buried in unarticulated perspectives and characterized by unexamined practices. The purpose of this article is to make explicit our engagement model. First, we share and discuss what engagement means to us. Then, we share interpretations of the conceptual, philosophical, and normative underpinnings of our work. By sharing our model, we hope to stimulate conversation about the models guiding others' work. Extended conversation is needed to inform and guide the engagement movement, including the leadership necessary for moving the work forward in institutional settings.

If engagement is to be a sustaining force in higher education, conversations must focus—first and foremost—on “the work.” There is nothing mysterious or new about what needs to be done. Scholars in all fields document the values, beliefs, and approaches that guide their work. Otherwise, their efforts will be buried in unarticulated perspectives and characterized by unexamined practices—inherently unscholarly outcomes.

The purpose of this article is to make explicit the essential features of an engagement model. The model is based on the separate engagement experiences of four colleagues—a sociologist, a rural developer, a teacher educator, and a community psychologist. Through extended dialogue in a faculty learning community, the group discovered compelling points of convergence associated with their engagement experiences—work undertaken by persons representing different disciplines, engaging in different settings, collaborating with different stakeholders, and working on different social issues.

We begin this essay by discussing multiple frames of references associated with our understanding of engagement—first, as a *thematic, connective expression*; second, as an *ethos*; and third, for the purpose of *action-based learning*. We then describe the model's

conceptual, philosophical, and normative underpinnings. Thematically, the model is grounded in the concept of what we call *Engaged Learning*. We close the essay with a definition of this concept.

Frames of Reference of Engaged Learning

As Thematic, Connective Expression: One way of viewing engagement is to think of it as a means of connecting the academy and society, primarily (if not exclusively) through service or outreach. While this is certainly one way of thinking about engagement (the predominant way), it is not the only way. Rather than restrict engagement to a single domain of the academic mission, we *experience engagement as a robust and dynamic phenomenon—cutting across the teaching, research, and service we do—as a thematic, connective expression*. For us, there is engagement *in teaching, in research, and in service* (see Fear, Rosaen, Foster-Fishman, and Bawden 2001).

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In the undergraduate and graduate classroom, in research, and in service, our work looks and feels very much the same. The cornerstone of engaged practice is co-participation guided by jointly created norms of engagement. We engage with collaborators in co-envisioned and co-constructed episodes of mutual

learning, discovery, and action. Issues are identified jointly, agendas for action are co-created, and evaluation is undertaken collaboratively. An example of engagement as thematic, connective expression is presented in Example 1.

Certainly, not all the work we do is engaged. Sometimes we play the role of expert knower in our teaching, research, and service endeavors—in effect, transferring what we know to those who request our knowledge. We often do this when stakeholders prefer it, an inquiry is straightforward, there is an answer to share, and time is pressing. This is not engaged practice—it carries other titles such as lecturing; providing technical assistance; and undertaking contract work, including consulting—but it is an appropriate and necessary practice under certain circumstances.

As Ethos: Engagement is a way for higher education to help people address issues, confront challenges, and solve problems. For us, engagement is that and more: *it is a way of being—on-campus and off—energized by norms of engagement*. According to Fear and

Example 1: Engagement as Thematic, Connective Expression

In 1995, the then-dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State expressed concern that undergraduate education in his college was becoming narrowly focused on matters pertaining to technical education. The challenges were broadening students' undergraduate learning without sacrificing the quality of specialized training and finding ways to fit an innovative program into the university's established ways of doing business. In January 1998, The Liberty Hyde Bailey Scholars Program was launched as twenty-one credit minor, available to all ANR students in good academic standing.

Bailey core courses have conventional course titles and numbers but course experiences are anything but conventional. On the first day of class, students and faculty begin the process of deciding what they want to learn together. Participation requires faculty and undergraduates to "unlearn" much of what they have come to know as teachers and students, respectively. Faculty members engage as co-learners—collaborating in the course design process, completing assignments with undergraduates, and learning with and from undergraduates. Undergraduates become full partners with faculty in a collaborative undertaking, often taking the lead in organizing learning experiences. In essence, faculty and undergraduates organize around shared learning interests and collaborate to make shared learning visions a reality (*Fear, Latinen, Woodward, and Gerulski 2001*).

As Professor Fear (chairperson of the design team and inaugural director) made presentations and wrote about the program with students, external colleagues expressed interest in the Bailey experience. Development collaborators from Ireland wondered about possibly applying "the Bailey way of learning" in rural community development efforts in their country. An international collaboration was launched. Working with a grassroots network of village leaders in the West of Ireland, MSU faculty members, Extension staff, and Bailey students undertake projects, each of which represents an initiative organized around shared interests of the local and university partners. For example, a Bailey student spent a year working in Irish villages helping to organize youth development efforts. Another Bailey student spent a semester working in the local secondary school incorporating community service into the curriculum using Bailey learning principles (*see Fear, Lillis, and Desmond 2002*). A study abroad offering gives Bailey (and other MSU) students an opportunity to spend six weeks each year working with Irish collaborators in grassroots development.

Example 2: Fostering New Practices in Teacher Education

About ten years ago, MSU teacher education faculty adopted a new fifth-year internship program designed to replace traditional “student teaching” experiences. Supporting the invention of new practices in the classroom required new practices in the teacher preparation program. When Dr. Rosaen took on the role of faculty leader for her teacher preparation team in the midst of the redesign process, she raised a key question: Were faculty and classroom teachers also finding new ways of working together that reflected a dedication to learning? Addressing this question required serious inquiry into the actual practices of faculty, mentors and interns. To what extent did actions transform the traditional student teaching experience into a mutually engaging learning opportunity for novice and experienced teachers? To what extent and how did the program changes actually improve the quality of current classroom practices and teacher preparation?

These questions were tackled initially through the creation of an Internship Task Force composed of faculty and experienced mentors who showed an active interest in learning about mentoring. The task force compared existing mentoring practices with the program’s visions for collaborative teaching and learning, asking hard questions about what each participant really meant by collaborative learning in the context of learning to teach. Task force members then identified key priorities for the internship year, created a curriculum for mentoring, and defined the practicum experiences. These plans were based on actual practices of experienced mentors, not merely on faculty’s theoretical ideas about learning to teach. The plans were reviewed by all program participants and revised again before becoming part of the Internship Guide the following fall. Throughout that year, survey data were collected from interns, a subset of interns and support staff were interviewed, and field and course instructors were involved in extensive discussions.

Based on data collected, refinements were made in guidelines and support for internship experiences. The cycles of inquiry and ongoing review by all participants continue so that the program’s efforts at transformation focus on shared visions and interests.

Sandmann (2001-02) and informed by Yankelovich (1999) these norms include respectfulness, collaboration, mutuality, and dedication to learning with emphasis on the values of community, responsibility, virtue, stewardship, and a mutual concern for each other. We have felt what it means *to engage* and *to be engaged*. There is deep commitment to the work and with the people who

are affected by it. Experience has shown how important it is to respect the unique aspects of context; to recognize that all participants have gifts and knowledge to offer; and to be open to new and sometimes profound learning episodes.

Our use of the word “ethos” tips our hand (as language always does) about how we see engagement—as a deeply personal stance. Embracing engagement as an ethos keeps us from objectifying engagement as a strategy only for use with external constituencies. We believe that engagement norms are relevant for all forms of academic work—from how project teams operate to how institutions of higher education function altogether. See a demonstration of this way of thinking in Example 2.

When framed this way, engagement becomes a leadership and management practice. For example, we believe that efforts designed to promote the idea of an “engaged (academic) institution” should align with and reinforce the essence of the intended change, namely, engagement. For example, almost all of our recent writing on engagement benefits from an approach taken at Michigan State—creating a “faculty learning community”—to help scholars across fields advance their understanding of engagement in theory and practice. This is a good example of an approach (a learning community) aligning with an intended change (becoming an engaged institution). A very different approach is taken when engagement is envisioned and promulgated by central administrators and enacted through systems redesign and the use of incentives and disincentives. We then have a misalignment between strategy and outcome: a conventional change approach used to diffuse an unconventional phenomenon, engagement (*Rosaen, Foster-Fishman, and Fear 2001, 24*).

For Action-Based Learning

Why engage? One answer is that it reaffirms higher education’s covenant with society. We view this as a necessary but insufficient answer. Whether undertaken as teaching, research, or service—or in ways that connect them dynamically—engagement for us is about *enhancing understanding and the capacity for action through learning*. For this reason, we advance *Engaged Learning* as a concept of choice. It aligns well with the dynamic and connective nature of our lives as faculty members. We publish discoveries associated with our engagement work, take to the classroom what we learn from field experiences, use “engaged” research practices, and involve our students in engagement projects.

There are three additional reasons for preferring the concept of Engaged Learning to the conventional term, engagement. First, the term engagement carries multiple meanings—used also to refer to a social commitment, an impending marriage, and a battlefield skirmish. The term Engaged *Learning* puts engagement in context, that is, in terms of how we seek to use it—for educational purposes. Second, Engaged Learning (versus engagement) proclaims the active nature of the underlying phenomenon. It is dynamic, not static, evolving over time—not an “it” to be understood and carried out mechanistically. The more we learn from experience, the better we shall be able to engage. Finally, we see *collaborative learning* (see Bruffee 1999) as common to all forms of Engaged Learning—in the undergraduate and graduate classroom, in participatory research, and in participatory forms of outreach. Commonalities across scholarly domains are blunted when engagement is seen only in organizational terms (e.g., extension *as* engagement) or when engagement is declared a separate feature of the organizational mission (e.g., learning, discovery, *and* engagement).

Scholarly Underpinnings of Engaged Learning

We believe that all Engaged Learning—no matter where it is undertaken, by whom, and for what purpose—is *informed conceptually, grounded philosophically, and undertaken with normative intent*. The purpose here is not to advance our model as *the* engagement model. Rather, it is to be explicit about how our work is informed conceptually, grounded philosophically, and undertaken with normative intent. In our opinion, the work of engagement cannot flourish unless the underlying dimensions of the work are made explicit and discourse is fostered.

Informed Conceptually: Our work is informed conceptually by what Lave and Wenger (1991) call *situated learning*. Situated learning is learning in context. Consider this interpretation by Hanks:

Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. This means, among other things, that it is mediated by the differences of perspective among the co-participants. It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, who “learn” under this definition. Learning is, at its core, distributed among co-participants, not a one-person act. (Hanks 1991, 14-15)

The primary form of situated learning in our work is *dialogue* (see Bohm 1996; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Isaacs 1999; and Yankelovich 1999). Dialogue enables learning from, with, and through others by enhancing understanding of complex issues and situations. It reflects a respectful stance: people listening to what others have to say about matters of importance—“engaging” for the purpose of understanding and taking action. Situated learning *through* dialogue differs remarkably from learning *from* experts in non-action contexts and then applying learning at a later time. Although that is an important way of learning, we do not see it as Engaged Learning.

We have confronted many challenges associated with using dialogue in our work. In our instrumental society—where moving quickly toward problem resolution is part and parcel of “effective leadership”—some find dialogue to be a waste of time. It can be an unnatural way to engage, as well. Among other things, effective dialogue requires listening (rather than promoting one’s point of view), suspending judgment (rather than imputing motives), and being open to having one’s position challenged (rather than challenging others’ positions).

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We have learned how important it is to recognize the complexities associated with who comes to the table, why, how those assembled prefer to interact, and how willing they are to put their beliefs (and themselves) “out there” for consideration. We have found that some are enriched by dialogic interactions while others feel dominated, even oppressed, by the experience. As illustrated in Example 3, trust is a key factor, as is the willingness to engage others authentically in public situations.

Grounded Philosophically: Our approach to Engaged Learning is philosophically grounded in what Heron and Reason (1997) refer to as a *participatory worldview*. A participatory worldview is different from a positivist worldview. Although society benefits enormously from a positivist way of knowing (e.g., it made flight possible), it is the antithesis of how we envision engaged learning. An example of a positivist-informed belief about engagement is to assert that “higher education has knowledge and communities have problems.” The *collegium* viewed as repository of knowledge has its place,

Example 3: Reducing Teen Pregnancy

The reducing teen pregnancy project is a grassroots effort to address the rising problem of teen pregnancy in an urban, primarily African-American community. A local coalition was created consisting of neighborhood leaders, human service delivery directors, local funders, community organization leaders, and an evaluation team headed by Professor Foster-Fishman. In the community development tradition, the project was designed by the coalition to engage local residents in community improvement efforts.

The community had a history of entrenched racism, including visible examples of educational and economic inequities. At the beginning of the project, participants voiced their agreement that underlying issues would need to be discussed and considered by coalition members for this initiative to succeed. Despite shared commitment—including using techniques to build group trust and holding quarterly retreat sessions to reflect on the group's process—the coalition failed to engage in authentic dialogue about difficult social issues. In fact, the group actively avoided dialogue by ignoring or redirecting any statements concerning inequity and race.

Individual interviews conducted by the evaluation team revealed why dialogue was constrained. Participants described fear of recrimination, specifically worrying that the funder present at the table (who provides millions each year for local programming) might “punish” those who speak against “the establishment.” Even the funding representative's commitment to addressing difficult issues was insufficient to assure members that this was a safe environment to speak out. Participants also stated that the pressure to produce an action plan left little time for dialogue during meetings. While the group met three hours every other week, the meeting agenda was typically filled with logistical issues. The need to produce a plan within one year (due to funding requirements) heightened the focus on product and diminished attention to process—even though most coalition members admitted (during informal exchanges, such as in parking lot conversations after meetings and at social engagements) that inattention to deeper issues was problematic. Finally, some members informed the interviewers that a group norm of conflict avoidance had emerged over time. Coalition members grew quite fond of each other and preferred meetings that went smoothly.

In the end, the pressure to produce an action plan coupled with the perceived costs associated with honesty (e.g., loss of funding, loss of relationships) created an environment that made it literally impossible to engage in authentic dialogue.

but it is different from what we know as engagement and it certainly is not what we do in the name of Engaged Learning.

A participatory worldview, on the other hand, lodges responsibility for learning in the hands of those who are most affected—people in context. A participatory worldview repositions knowledge

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from a commodity produced by experts out of context to a shared enterprise of knowledge creation that is contextually relevant. A participatory worldview is the foundation for many forms of participatory inquiry, such as action and participatory research (see, for example, *Greenwood and Levin 1998; and Reason and Bradbury*

2001)—inherently experiential, interactive, and iterative “in which all involved engage in democratic dialogue . . . to define the questions they wish to explore and the methodology for that exploration” (*Heron and Reason 1997, 288*).

A participatory worldview also endorses what we know today as a sustainability ethic. It is a way of “being in the world” with bio-centric valence (see *O’Sullivan 1999*), affirming the importance of the human condition but not restricting it as the exclusive concern. A participatory worldview is not about “quick fixes” and settling for the greatest gains in the shortest possible time. It emphasizes an “oneness ethic” that urges us to recapture a sense of wonder and awe with and of the world. It seizes our sense of responsibility for all living things, not just for people. This philosophy stands in stark contrast to the “people first” ethic of modern society where resources have been exploited to maintain and sustain elite lifestyles.

Undertaken with Normative Intent: A good share of what seems to pass today as engagement includes applied endeavors of all sorts. For us, it is not a matter of declaring some outcomes better than others (that would be an arrogant position), but of clarifying what is and is not worthy of the title “engagement.” We do not see engagement as an equivalent term for historic functions, such as Extension. By the same token, we do not view engagement as a catch basin for all applied work. For example, we exclude from engagement an effort made by faculty and students to design more comfortable airline seats for transcontinental travel. This is important work, certainly a contribution to society. But it should be called

outreach, corporate consulting, or an internship—not engagement. Calling it engagement trivializes what we believe to be the essential attributes of Engaged Learning described in this essay.

For us, the normative underpinnings of Engaged Learning address important questions: “Why are we doing this?” and “Toward what ends?” Again, we turn to Heron and Reason (1997) for guidance. We see what they call *human flourishing* as the purpose of our work and, as its context, what has been termed *inclusive well-being* (Prozesky 1999)—enhancing the quality of life as inclusively as possible.

One of the most important contributions of Engaged Learning as we practice it is joining with people as they make informed

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decisions, particularly in circumstances that are ambiguous, uncertain, and risky. Doing that requires the public and faculty alike to appreciate the importance of who participates in making choices, who is likely to be most affected, and how much. Guided by our participatory worldview, it means that we do not coerce or exert influence in a partisan way. It mandates that

we champion inclusivity and foster appreciation for considering multiple ways of valuing and knowing.

But Engaged Learning for us is more than attending to matters of process and participation. In development work today, there is a strong temptation to work within conventional parameters. As we reflect on the work we did before becoming engaged learners, it strikes us how informed it was by efforts that were viable economically, supportable politically, and needed immediately. It is not as though those attributes are irrelevant today. They simply do not represent for us a complete portrait of what it means “to engage” and “to be engaged.” Necessary also are ecological responsibility, ethical comportment, cultural respectfulness, and appreciation for spiritual well being, among other things. Being explicit about the conceptual, philosophic, and normative underpinnings of engagement has helped us understand this. Consequently, rather than simplify the options and thus avoiding inevitable tensions and conflicts, as engaged scholars we work collaboratively with people in the process of developing workable strategies in inherently complex situations. One way of approaching this is illustrated in Example 4.

Example 4: Systemic Development in Rural Australia

Professor Bawden and his colleagues at Hawkesbury College (Bawden 1999) promote the notion of systemic or integrated development. It is a critical theme for participatory development in rural communities in Australia, a quest that focuses on achieving sustainable livelihoods within the context of “inclusive well-being.”

Faculty, students, rural people, and service professionals engage in discussions about potential future strategies for rural Australia that are both practical and ethical. These conversations, which have been ongoing for over two decades, take place in village halls, community centers, barns, and farm family homes. Collaborators explore challenges associated with sustainable rural development by creating and then engaging in dialogue about different and plausible scenarios of the future. Permeating the conversations is the need to think about development futures in “both-and” ways vis-à-vis the conventional either/or way. The goal is development that is both:

aesthetically acceptable and technically possible
ethically defensible and economically viable
culturally feasible and socially desirable
spiritually compatible and practically manageable
ecologically responsible and politically supportable.

Closing Comments

Author and educator Parker Palmer (2001) recently noted that people are more likely to “live their way into a new way of thinking than they are to think their way into a new way of living.” That aphorism certainly applies to our discovery of what we now call Engaged Learning; we lived our way into this new way of thinking. Having said that, it was our conversations in a community of faculty learners that enabled us to give collective experience a name—Engaged Learning—and to appreciate its relevance in theory and practice. It is through what Heron and Reason (2001, p. 1984) call “critical subjectivity” (intersubjectivity, in our case) that we understand that any attempt to know “is from a perspective.” Recognizing that, we sought to clarify and elaborate our perspective. We invite you to do the same.

For us, Engaged Learning is a rich and deeply lived experience—energized by passion for the work; expressed as a collaborative creation of mind, heart, and spirit; and stimulated by a vision for a better world. Reflecting that stance, we close this essay with a definition:

Grounded in an ethos of mutuality, respectfulness, and stewardship, proceeding through dialogue, and fostering inclusive well being, Engaged Learning is an approach, an expression of being, a leadership ethic, and a way for scholars, practitioners, and administrators to connect otherwise diverse activities thematically, coherently, and meaningfully.

Note

Many of the ideas shared in this essay emerged from conversations associated with the “engagement learning community” at Michigan State University. This collegial space is made possible with funding provided by the Office of the Assistant Provost for University Outreach; the Institute for Children, Youth, and Families; and the FACT (Families and Children Together) Coalition. Portions of the text were drawn from a paper presented by the senior author at the Luce Foundation Roundtable on Leadership Education held at Marietta College in October 2001.

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