

Engaging Communities as Scholarship

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The contemporary university in Australia publicly states a commitment to engaging communities, yet engagement is not often seen as a core activity of academics. This paper suggests that engagement should be regarded as a form of scholarship that should be added to the four types of scholarship identified by Ernest Boyer. The paper also suggests some measurements of outcomes for quality audit purposes.

1. Introduction

The contemporary university in Australia is typically committed to teaching, research and service, although there are many 'teaching only' higher education institutions and there might soon be 'teaching only universities' (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). Recently, universities have begun embracing regional or community engagement and a number of conferences have focused on engagement this year—*The 2005 NSW Regional Engagement Forum*, the annual conference of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance, and this Forum. No doubt activities such as these conferences have been prompted by the very assertive statements concerning the obligation that higher education institutions, especially regional institutions and campuses, have for community engagement based on 'mutual recognition of community service obligations' and which 'contributes strategically to the economic and social viability of both the institution and the community' (Nelson, 2002, p. 23). In this paper it is suggested that engagement should be regarded as a form of scholarship that can be added to the four types of scholarship identified by Boyer (1997) to yield a yet 'broader and more capacious meaning' of scholarship than Boyer enunciated.

In section 2 of this paper Boyer's characterisation of scholarship as comprising four elements is described. In section 3 it is suggested that engagement should be regarded as a fifth type of scholarship. Some suggested measurements of engagement outcomes for quality audit purposes are outlined in section 4, and concluding comments are made in section 5.

2. Boyer's Scholarship Reconsidered

Ernest Boyer's seminal work on scholarship in the American university (Boyer, 1997) was first published in 1990 and is well-known among university educators. Boyer's central thesis was that although universities had, by the latter part of the twentieth century, embraced the rhetoric of the teaching-research-service university, in practice all that really mattered in decisions regarding promotion and tenure was research output. He argued persuasively that such decisions should take into account four types of scholarship, namely discovery, integration, application and teaching. Each is outlined briefly below:

- *discovery*—this is what most academics understand to be basic research expressed as a 'commitment to knowledge for its own sake, to freedom of inquiry and to following, in a disciplined fashion, an investigation wherever it may lead' (Boyer, 1997, p. 17).
- *integration*—this is about giving meaning to the isolated facts of discovery expressed as 'serious, disciplined work that seeks to interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear on original research' (Boyer, 1997, p. 19). Integration involves the making of connections among disciplines and giving context to discovery. Together discovery and integration constitute what most academics would consider to be research.
- *application*—Boyer also calls this 'service'. It is based on the idea that higher education institutions must serve the interests of the larger community. In Australian and New Zealand the term 'extension' has often been used, particularly in the context of agricultural research. Knowledge gained from

research must be applied to problems in industry and society. Boyer sees this as a 'two way street' in which not only are the results of research applied to problems, but problems themselves, when identified, influence research.

- *teaching*—this is the activity in which the research and application work of the academic becomes consequential because it is understood by others. '...(T)eaching begins with what the teacher knows. Those who teach must, above all, be well informed, and steeped in the knowledge of their fields. Teaching can be well regarded only as professors are widely read and intellectually engaged' (Boyer, 1997, p. 23). Clearly, in Boyer's opinion, teaching is far more than a 'routine function, tacked on, something almost anyone can do' (Boyer, 1997, p. 23).

Boyer argued that these four forms of scholarship should not be interpreted as a hierarchy in which discovery is regarded as more important than any other activity and from which other forms of scholarship grow. He argued that they should all be seen as forms of scholarship, separate, but overlapping functions of the academic.

3. A Fifth Form of Scholarship

Boyer's characterisation of application comes close to the contemporary idea of engagement because he alludes to the problems of industry and society defining an agenda for 'scholarly investigation'. He used the land grant colleges in the United States, established in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as an example of how higher education was meant to support the emerging agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. However, it might be argued that engagement goes further than application and requires the setting up of institutional frameworks in which the community can directly influence *all* of the scholarships defined by Boyer. A prerequisite for such influence is 'a strong and meaningful *relationship* between a university and its community' (Lovegrove, 2004, p. 1, emphasis in the original). Lovegrove (2004) suggested that the principles of engagement in youth and education programming defined by the W K Kellogg Foundation (2002, p. 3) were useful in defining the key elements of this relationship. The university and community:

- see their present and future well-being as inextricably linked;
- collaboratively plan and design mutually beneficial programs and outcomes;
- engage in reciprocal learning;
- respect the history, culture, knowledge and wisdom of each other;
- create structures that promote open communication and equity with one another;
- have high expectations for their performance and involvement with each other; and
- regularly conduct a joint assessment of their partnership and report results.

It almost goes without saying that such a relationship is an intensely scholarly one, requiring appropriate institutional arrangements that harness the skills, knowledge and experience of both academics in the university and people in the community to facilitate:

- researching community attitudes and needs, and problems in industry and society;
- translating, with the active involvement of the community, the results of the research activities above into the scholarships of discovery, integration, application and teaching; and
- assessing how well the scholarly output of the university meets the needs of the community and develops solutions to the problems of industry and society.

The appropriate institutional arrangements might differ among communities, but they would need to be oriented towards open communication, encouraging a willingness to reveal problems and issues where they occur and the production of good documentation of the community research undertaken. The latter might provide a rich resource for research in its own right.

4. Measurement of Outcomes for Quality Audit Purposes

If engagement is to be regarded seriously as a scholarly activity, appropriate measurement of outcomes for quality purposes is desirable. Such measurement would involve both method and indicators. Methods could include surveys, focus groups, and mapping. A number of indicators might be suggested and are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Longitudinal data about community attitudes: These could be obtained by surveys and used to judge what the community thinks about its relationship with the university and how this changes over time as the university actively involves its community in defining its own directions and activities. Key stakeholders, such as employers, non-profit organisations, schools, local government and graduates could be included in survey samples. An addition or alternative to surveys would be focus groups held with key stakeholders. These would not provide quantitative data, but focus group records would provide rich qualitative information about community attitudes.

Mapping community needs and problems in industry and society to the scholarships of discovery, integration, application and teaching: Assuming that research has been undertaken that identifies needs and problems, the activities of academics could be mapped. In general one might expect that a university that is strongly engaged with its community would be able to demonstrate that a large proportion of its discovery, integration, application and teaching is informed by the community and industry (with the weakest linkage being between discovery and the community, given the nature of basic research described in section 2). The degree to which community needs are reflected in the activities of the university would be an indicator of the depth of engagement.

The number of teaching programs that involve industry, the university and other education providers (including schools and vocational education providers) in the university's region: This would demonstrate that the needs and problems of industry and society are the drivers of teaching in the university. It should be understood in this context that the focus ought not to be exclusively on technological solutions to problems, but that there should also be focus on history and culture and other elements associated with mutual understanding and respect for diversity. In this context involvement could include stakeholder membership of curriculum advisory or evaluation panels and contribution to curriculum design, content and delivery. Another form of involvement might be service learning, in which students engage with the community in projects that use their acquired knowledge and skills for the benefit of the community and practice reflection on their experience.

The proportion of school leavers in the university's region who choose to study at that university rather than a university in another region: It is common in the evaluation of community engagement to record the number of members of the community that participate in engagement 'events' (see, for example, The State of Queensland, Department of Communities (2004, p. 2)). If a university is successfully engaging its community, then school leavers will see the university in their region as offering relevance and will be more likely to enroll. Of course, it ought not to be expected that all school leavers will gravitate to the university in their region because school leavers choose universities on other bases. However, in relation to rural and isolated school leavers, survey evidence reported by James, *et al* (1999) indicated 'that for rural and isolated secondary students, the more important choice factor is availability of the best course in their area of interest, not the relative proximity of a university or campus... If a student has a clear idea of what he or she wants, and feels that he or she will not necessarily gain that outcome at the nearby "regional" institution, then they are very likely to go elsewhere, and just as probably will apply for admission to a capital city university or campus' (p. iii). The choice of university was revealed by the survey to be 'discriminating and sophisticated' (p. iii).

The proportion of graduates of the university who find employment in the university's region (and possibly the proportion of students who come to the university from other regions, but who find employment in the university's region): If a university is engaging its community successfully, its scholarly activities will be oriented to its region and its graduates will readily find employment there.

This is not to say that a community would actively discourage graduates from moving away from the region for a time in order to gain experience. Therefore, this indicator might be best lagged to capture the incidence of graduates returning to the region after having gained some work experience.

Although none of the indicators above could be taken, on its own, to define the degree to which a university has succeeded in engagement, together they could provide an overall impression as to how effective have been the institutional arrangements made to actively involve the community in the scholarly activities of its academics. Furthermore, in making decisions about tenure and promotion, universities should take into account the community engagement activities of individual staff, perhaps by mapping their scholarly activities to community needs and the problems of industry and society and by considering the role of service learning in their teaching strategy.

5. Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued that engagement should be considered as a fifth type of scholarship, expanding the four associated with the work of Boyer. The basis for the argument was that the activities associated with engagement are intensely scholarly in nature, requiring the development of appropriate institutional arrangements to actively involve the community in directing the directions of the university and scholarly activities of its academic staff. The paper also suggested a number of indicators that might be used in a quality audit of institutions claiming to have successfully engaged their community. If, universities and other higher education institutions have an obligation for community engagement, as was asserted in *Higher Education at the Crossroads*, then indicators of the degree to which they have succeeded are a must.

Universities might usefully consider engagement as a scholarly activity on a par with the other four forms of scholarship articulated by Boyer.

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