

The Craft Of Public Scholarship in Land-Grant Education

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Abstract

The emerging movement to deepen and expand higher education's civic mission and work is calling on scholars to enter the public realm and become actively engaged in civic life. To heed the call, scholars will need to embrace and pursue a view of scholarship as a public rather than a private craft, one that brings them into public space and relationships in order to facilitate knowledge discovery, learning, and action relevant to civic issues and problems. In this paper, we tell the story of one scholar who has helped us understand and appreciate the craft of public scholarship in land-grant education. Drawing from the findings of an action research project we have launched, we then identify some of the practical skills, value commitments, and institutional supports that public scholars need in order to be successful in their work.

Introduction

The emerging movement to deepen and expand higher education's civic mission and work is calling on scholars to enter the public realm and become actively engaged in civic life (*Kellogg Commission 1999; Ehrlich and Hollander 1999; Ehrlich 2000*). But scholars have long been urged to resist calls for civic engagement; many hold the view that scholarship—the work of the scholar—is a kind of *private* craft, to be done away and apart from civic life. Under this view, the proper stance of the scholar is detachment, not engagement.

Walter Lippmann issued a classic statement in defense of detachment in his Phi Beta Kappa Oration delivered at Columbia University's commencement exercises in 1932, which he titled "The Scholar in a Troubled World." In his address, Lippmann described scholars as torn between two different consciences. On the one hand, there is a civic conscience that tells a scholar that he or she "ought to be doing something about the world's troubles" (*Lippmann 1932; 509*). But on the other hand, there is what Lippmann called the "conscience of the scholar, which tells him [sic] that as one whose business it is to examine the nature of things, to imagine

how they work, and to test continually the proposals of his imagination, he must preserve a quiet indifference to the immediate" (509-10). By "the immediate," Lippmann was referring to the messy, contentious world of civic life. The main point of his speech was to argue in favor of detachment from civic life as the right and proper stance of the scholar. As Lippmann put it, "I doubt whether the student can do a greater work for his nation in this grave moment of its history than to detach himself from its preoccupations, refusing to let himself be absorbed by distractions about which, as a scholar, he can do almost nothing" (515).

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Alan Wolfe, an eminent scholar who is professor of sociology and political science at Boston University, recently endorsed Lippmann's view of scholarship as a private craft. In an essay published in 1997 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wolfe argued against the idea that scholars should or could conduct their scholarship in and through civic engagement. Speaking for himself, Wolfe wrote, "My obligation to the public is to offer it what I know: *knowledge discovered by retreating into private space*, the product of my particular approach, work habits, insights, presentation, and interpretation of the thoughts of others" (Wolfe 1997, 4; *italics added*).

While Lippmann and Wolfe's views about a scholar's civic stance and obligations might be widely accepted in academic life, in our judgment they are far too limited. We believe that scholars can heed the call of the engagement movement and become engaged in civic life as scholars (rather than as community service volunteers, for example) in ways that produce products of value to both academic and civic life. Scholars can choose to embrace and pursue a view of scholarship as a public rather than a private craft, one that brings them into *public* space and relationships in order to facilitate knowledge discovery, learning, and action relevant to civic issues and problems.

Through their outreach programs and extension systems, land-grant colleges and universities have long provided vehicles for public scholarship. But the actual craft of public scholarship in land-grant education is not well understood or appreciated. In relation to this

problem, we have launched an action research project that is designed to develop and strengthen the theory and practice of public scholarship in the national land-grant system. Our initial method has been to find and interview scholars who have reputations for being engaged in civic life *as scholars*, and whose work has produced products that have both academic and civic value. Following Forester's (1999) use of narrative as a means for gaining critical insight into professional practice, we have developed a set of thirty-seven "practitioner profiles" of public scholars in the land-grant system. These profiles, which are based on the edited transcripts of tape-recorded interviews offer richly nuanced first-person accounts of particular "practice stories" of public scholarship.

In this paper, we present the practice story of one of the public scholars we profiled whose work has been especially useful in helping us to begin to understand and appreciate the craft of public scholarship in land-grant education. After sketching this scholar's practice story, we draw from the larger pool of profiles we have developed in order to identify some of the practical skills, value commitments, and institutional supports that public scholars need in order to be successful in their work, and the nature of the barriers that stand in their way.

A Story of Public Scholarship in Practice

Engagement in the public work of wildlife management can provide a means for a serious scholar to contribute to both civic and academic life. This is the central lesson we learned from our interview with Dan Decker, a full professor in the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell University who is currently serving as director of the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station and associate dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Dan has played a pioneering leadership role in developing the human dimensions specialization in wildlife management. He co-founded the Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU) in Cornell's Department of Natural Resources, which provides him and his colleagues with an ongoing platform for engaging in scholarly public work devoted to the transformation of both theory and practice in wildlife management in New York State and beyond.

The story of Dan's role in the development of the human dimensions specialization in wildlife management began in the early 1970s when he was a student at Cornell. Dan entered Cornell as a natural resources major with a wildlife management orientation. According to Dan, wildlife management—both as a professional practice and

a field of academic study—was almost entirely based on biology at the time. However, an appreciation and awareness was developing of the importance of non-biological dimensions of wildlife management, especially education and communication. Dan was introduced to and became interested in these dimensions through a course he took during his junior year. He followed up on his interest by doing an independent study as a senior on the communications and educational issues related to deer management in the Adirondacks.

Dan decided to continue his exploration of the nonbiological dimensions of wildlife management by pursuing a master's degree at Cornell. In his master's work, Dan continued his study of deer management in the Adirondacks, which began what has become a career-long relationship with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Bureau of Wildlife. As Dan remembers,

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I got a grant to look at the public image of the deer management program and wildlife management professionals in the Adirondacks. It was a huge controversy up there, a major contentious issue. The then-chief of the Bureau of Wildlife, a Cornell grad, had said, "Our problem is not our biology but our image, our communication. We need you to go up there and look at that, you've been interested in it, go do it." (Decker quoted in *Peters 2002*, is the source of this excerpt and those that follow.)

Dan finished his master's work in December of 1975. He stayed on to work as a research support specialist with Tom Brown, a senior research associate in Cornell's Department of Natural Resources. Over the next several years Dan and Tom founded a new unit in the department that was devoted to exploring the "people aspects" of natural resource management. It was groundbreaking work. As Dan told us, "That was an area that, believe it or not, was just not being studied." The theoretical and practical challenge, as they saw it then, was to work out an answer to a difficult question: "How do you do management, not just for recreation, but across the whole spectrum of natural resources to the benefit of society?"

When Dan and Tom began their work, it was becoming more and more obvious that there was something seriously wrong with the theory and practice of wildlife management. As Dan recalled,

The top-down expert model was going by the wayside really quickly. If it ever worked at all, it wasn't working starting in the late 1970s. I learned that from failure after failure of natural resource agencies to be successful, by essentially revolutions by stakeholders where they used political means to take away authority of the natural resource agencies. In the Adirondacks in New York, for example, the political folks got together because of the pressure from the constituents up there, and one-third of the state became off-limits for wildlife agencies to do any deer management. That was a little bit of a problem. That's not a success story.

Some of the key leaders in the Bureau of Wildlife were aware that things were not working, but they didn't know what to do about it. They came to Dan and Tom for help. In response, Dan and Tom began to inquire into a broad, fundamental question. As Dan told us, "We started asking, 'Well, why do you manage wildlife?' This is a very fundamental question. And it's not to make jobs for wildlife managers. It's to meet the needs of society."

Asking this question revealed a deep level of ignorance about what the "needs of society" were with respect to wildlife management, which in turn opened up a path and direction for Dan and Tom's scholarship. As Dan remembers,

The number of stakeholders interested in this expanded from just the recreationists—i.e., hunters—to land owners, farmers, and forest owners. The managers in the bureau knew nothing about what those folks wanted. They didn't deal with them. So we came in and did social science to try to identify who these people were, characterize them, where they were, the nature of the problems that they were having with wildlife, the nature of concerns they had with management technology, what they wanted to see in terms of benefits of the wildlife resource. This knowledge could then be used to inform decision making so you could apply the biology to get those effects. The tradition had always been, and still is in many places, that you start from what do you want to do on the biology side and somehow that all works out. Well, it doesn't.

Over the next twenty-five years, Dan and Tom built up a large research and extension education program that addresses the human dimensions of wildlife management, housed in the Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU) in Cornell's Department of Natural Resources. The Bureau of Wildlife financially supported the unit on a contractual basis over this entire period. The Bureau's support currently totals approximately a quarter of a million dollars per year.

Dan and Tom and their students and colleagues have seen the focus of their work evolve through three distinct stages. They began with what they called an "inquisitive" stage, which involved shifting wildlife management from an "expert only" model to getting input from stakeholders through survey research. The second stage

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was a "transactional" stage, which involved the creation of citizen task forces throughout the state to allow for deeper and more direct input into management decisions and practices. The third stage of the evolution of their program, which is still emerging, is a "co-management" stage, which shifts citizens into playing roles as co-managers and collaborators with professionals in the work of wildlife management.

Throughout the course of this evolution, Dan and Tom's work has involved two interrelated levels of research and education: one with wildlife professionals, and another with citizens and communities. At both levels this work has been deeply challenging to both professionals and citizens. The broad approach to the work has been to create vehicles for inquiry and education that question behaviors, attitudes, assumptions, and goals, rather than, for example, passively providing educational "services" to meet felt needs. According to Dan, this approach has resulted in transformations in relationships and responsibilities on the part of citizens and professionals, including Dan and his colleagues. For example, Dan sees the central work of the HDRU as going beyond the "traditional" roles of knowledge creation and dissemination that land-grant faculty and extension educators typically play, to the work of providing leadership for change. In Dan's words,

What we did through our extension positions is, we disseminated knowledge to communities, to professionals who work with communities in natural resource management

who you had to deal with if we're going to get change and improvement in the management system. But the biggest thing that we did through extension was provide leadership for all that. Leadership for change. We're change agents in the old-fashioned term. Changing the perspective, philosophy, approach of a profession across the country, starting in New York. Changing how that profession interacts with communities, with how one builds the capacity of communities to deal with a new role. We led that effort through research and through education.

Dan has been a primary leader of the wildlife-related research component of his unit. He completed a Ph.D. in the mid-1980s, and took an assistant professor position in the Department of Natural Resources in 1988. In his academic work, he told us, he has "stayed engaged with rural people, on the ground, in trying to use New York State as my laboratory." The essence of his scholarly work has been to test the assumptions of the wildlife management community, which he says his unit's research has often shown to be wrong, and to develop new concepts that ground and guide both theory and practice. He and his colleagues have developed concepts like "threshold of tolerance" and "wildlife acceptance capacity," as well as theoretically based measurement tools such as the "wildlife attitudes and values scale." According to Dan, each of these has proven to be valuable for both wildlife management practitioners and scholars, as evidenced by the fact that they have all been adopted in varying degrees across the nation.

Dan's theoretical and conceptual development work has come directly out of numerous experiences with practical research and educational work at the local level on specific wildlife management problems. It may take twenty or more such experiences to develop a concept like "wildlife acceptance capacity." This kind of integrated approach has required Dan to become highly skilled in meshing two agendas: a practical agenda of working with people on their context-bound problems with wildlife management, and a longer term scholarly agenda of developing theory and concepts and ideas about wildlife management. As Dan told us,

The challenge of scholarly effort is being able to identify general themes, theory and concepts that can be applied across all sorts of arenas. It's not the result of one particular study. We do individual studies for agencies that need to make a decision today, but the thing we're always

mentoring and training students and staff about is, "Okay, we can do that, as long as we keep in mind what our scholarly, knowledge development, and conceptual development agenda is as an academic institution." Every time we do one of these applied projects to help meet a need out there, if we keep in mind how we do that so we contribute to and keep improving the knowledge base or the conceptual framework, then we're doing our direct land-grant mission and our academic mission simultaneously. That's how we operate. We always couple the two agendas. There's the practical agenda of agencies that usually pay, they want a product, and then there's our own agenda. That's how we build it.

Discussion

Dan's practice story raises a host of tough epistemological and political questions related to the craft of public scholarship that cannot be conclusively answered by the profile we constructed. However, we feel confident that his story does allow us to draw one broad and important conclusion. Dan's story offers credible evidence that contradicts the view of Lippmann (and those who still hold it) that scholars can do "almost nothing" *as scholars* about the world's immediate troubles. Dan and his colleagues and students have built up their entire research and education program in direct relationship with a public agency that was (and still is) struggling to improve its work in addressing pressing problems of wildlife management across New York State. In the process, they have demonstrated that it is possible for academic professionals to pursue their scholarship through a stance of deep engagement, leading to products of both public and academic value. Crucially, they have shown that deep public engagement does not require the sacrifice of academic values; neither the intrinsic integrity of their scholarly work nor its practical accomplishment appears to have been compromised by public engagement. In fact, Dan's story provides a compelling counterexample, in which the creation of public value was strongly dependent on the creation of academic value, and vice versa. His story shows that these forms of value can feed and build upon each other.

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Dan speaks of how he has "stayed engaged with rural people, on the ground, in trying to use New York State as my laboratory." Without this engagement, which has included numerous experiences of wrestling with immediately urgent problems related to wildlife management, he and his colleagues could not have done their research. The knowledge and theory they built to address the larger problem of the ineffectiveness of the theory and practice of wildlife management did not come out of "retreating into private space," as Alan Wolfe recommends. Rather, it came directly out of *public* experience. It couldn't have been created any other way.

Dan's practice story, along with the other practice stories we have developed in our research, dramatizes and illuminates what we have come to view as the central challenge involved in the craft of public scholar-

ship in land-grant education: how to develop a sustainable, long-term, integrated research and outreach agenda that contributes to civic life in specific contexts while also contributing to the development of high quality knowledge and theory in one's academic discipline. Meeting this challenge requires proficiency in a set of intellectual and political skills, a firm grounding in a set of values-based commitments, and supportive policies, structures, and culture both inside and outside the academy.

Skills and Commitments for Success in the Craft of Public Scholarship: Based on what we have learned from Dan's story, and on our analysis of the full set of practitioner profiles we have developed in our research, we have come to see the following skills and commitments as essential for excellence and success in the craft of public scholarship in land-grant education:

- First, public scholars must be skilled in conducting research that has a *dual nature*: it is valuable both for producing knowledge and theory that can help citizens and communities address public problems, and for advancing knowledge and theory in their own disciplines or fields. However, public scholars must develop intellectual practices—"habits of mind"—that create and maintain this duality in their scholarly practice. Specifically,

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they must develop capacities that enable them to work in arenas where public problems are being constructively addressed *as representatives of their academic disciplines*, and work in the intellectual community of their academic discipline *as representatives of such public arenas*. These capacities include the ability to communicate their work so as to create genuine critical dialogue about its premises and findings, and the ability to transpose public problems into the problematics of their disciplines. We want to emphasize here one of our key findings: public scholarship is discipline neutral. We have found that committed and successful public scholars in the land-grant system come from a wide range of fields and disciplines in the natural and social sciences, the arts and humanities, and engineering.

- Second, because work in public arenas directly engages scholars in messy and oftentimes contentious public work involving diverse groups of people and institutions with conflicting interests and aims and uneven distributions of power, they must have some combination of civic capacities and skills to be successful. Some of the key ca-

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capacities and skills the public scholars we profiled exhibit include the ability to identify and negotiate the self-interests of people and organizations in ways that are simultaneously respectful and challenging; a willingness and ability to listen with a sympathetic but also critical ear; and the ability to facilitate and/or contribute to public deliberation and dialogue.

- Third, the public scholars we have profiled do not regard themselves as merely skilled technicians who work from a stance of neutrality about the moral, political, economic, cultural, and environmental issues inherent in the civic issues they address. We find that their scholarly practices are firmly grounded in a set of values-based commitments. These include a commitment to democracy, to leadership development, to environmental stewardship, to fairness, justice, openness, and honesty, to respecting the dignity, integrity, intelligence, wisdom, and potential of all kinds of people, and to the beauty and integrity of specific communities and places. We conclude that to practice public scholarship, academics must develop a scholarly practice that actively realizes these values.

Supports Needed to Enable Public Scholarship: Our research has also suggested what forms of support are needed to enable public scholarship. We have learned that public scholarship requires two sources of support: from its public and civic context, and from its home academic institution. We find that public scholarship is critically dependent on a well-organized and functional public arena. Such an arena links scholars with allies and working partners outside the academy; it hosts activities arising from active, ongoing, and well-resourced efforts to develop and support strong civic cultures in relevant communities and public organizations. These cultures enable ongoing dialogue, deliberation, and concerted efforts to address public problems; we find that these are necessary conditions for the interplay of scholarly and public work that is the essence of public scholarship.

Within the academy, there must be tangible rewards for public scholarship provided by supportive promotion and tenure policies. For example, these policies must articulate a clear and strong civic mission, establish criteria for evaluating the relationship between scholarship and the performance of a civic mission, and recognize the significant "transaction costs" of establishing effective working relationships in public arenas. Strong mentors must exist for graduate students and junior faculty, who teach essential skills of public scholarship and, equally, also model relevant values and commitments.

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Barriers to the Craft of Public Scholarship: There are very real barriers to the craft of public scholarship. Many of the barriers are simply the reverse of the above supports—that is, a lack of mentors, a lack of partners and allies, and so on. But perhaps the single most important barrier public scholars face is the barrier of illegitimacy, linked to the continuing predominance of Lippmann and Wolfe's view that good scholarship is fundamentally a private craft that must be conducted from a stance of detachment. It is troubling to find, as we have, that this view predominates even in the land-grant system, which is supposed, in theory at least, to be devoted to building partnerships between scholars and communities in order to address public issues and problems. The good news, as Dan Decker and many others across the nation have shown us, is that public scholars have managed to thrive and succeed in the land-grant

system nonetheless. How much longer they will continue to be able to do so, and whether or not another generation of scholars will follow in their footsteps, is an open question.

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