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A Reactive, Radical Approach to Engaged Scholarship

Malcolm Smith

Abstract

While exploring the current challenges facing academic institutions and the needs of their scholars to make their work relevant in the lives of university constituents, the author advocates for a reactive and radical approach to engaged scholarship by outlining an 8-step process that considers the importance of transformation, immediacy, and relevance in academic research in the field of human service.

Introduction

The growing gap between academic research and actual practice in the field of human service, particularly in service to children and families, is well-known by practitioners and well-substantiated by academics *(Osterling & Austin, 2008; Glasgow, Lichtenstein, & Marcus, 2003; Martin & Martin, 1989)*. This gap puts human service faculty members and students at odds with the growing needs of the human service field in two ways: academics often teach and use methods that have academic relevance but not practical relevance, and practitioners often devalue academic knowledge relative to experiential knowledge. There is wariness toward academic solutions that are grounded in theory and literature rather than in the immediacy of practice. This more theoretical approach often makes academic institutions and human service departments irrelevant in the eyes of practitioners, who see academic researchers as largely trying to use their programs as testing grounds for theories and assumptions that are often not grounded in real world experience.

The growing gap between human service practitioners and academics appears to be fueled by changes on both fronts. For example:

- *Many public and private funding streams are requiring that their recipients use "evidence-based" programming*. In reality, human service programs that meet this intense criterion (usually associated with double-blind and medical-model-type studies) are (1) few and far between and hard to find, (2) often not flexible enough to be used with rapidly changing social and

familial conditions, (3) restricted in practicality and efficacy since "evidence" is often out-of-date or addressing antiquated issues by the time it is sufficient to meet the "evidence-based" criterion, and (4) often expensive to procure and administer *(Burton & Chapman, 2004)*. Thus, many practitioner programs have come to distrust "evidence-based" programs.

- *There is a growing inaccessibility of academic peer-reviewed journals*. Academic journal subscriptions have become increasingly expensive, causing many libraries, especially university libraries, to discontinue subscriptions. Few human service agencies can afford subscriptions to all publications in the field. In addition, there has been a continued fragmentation of academic disciplines into smaller fields, which creates more places for "evidence" to hide. It can take months or even years to complete the peer-review process due to the time constraints of the largely volunteer peer reviewers. With rapidly changing familial structures, world and local economies, and demographic landscapes, old news is often not as relevant *(Morris, 2009; Weiner, 2001)*.
- *The promotion and tenure process at many universities does not reward engaged scholarship*. Many research universities still do not value engaged research *(Van de Ven, 2007)*, nor recognize it adequately during the promotion and tenure process.
- *Although faculty members access human service programs to provide students with "real world" internships and to test research questions, those experiences are seldom allowed to influence the university itself*. In order to become more relevant to the field and to students, academic programs could gain immediacy and relevance if conduits were created through which students' experiences and practitioners' knowledge could flow back to researchers.

Although newer models of engagement have emerged, most of them, like Van de Ven's *(2007)* work on the subject, try to use existing, promotion-based archetypes to describe the process. This approach often puts the researcher, rather than the practitioner or clients, in charge of asking the questions. For example, the first tier

of Van de Ven's diamond model of engaged scholarship calls for a researcher to "Situate, ground, diagnose, and infer the research problem" *(p. 10)*.

This terminology suggests that it is the researcher, not the community, agency, practitioner, or client, who has the ability to fix a system. Thus, the decision making goes to a researcher who "diagnoses" the problem, stepping out of the engagement role by bringing to the situation an academic bias. Many human service practitioners have become suspect of academics that try to make fluid real world problems fit into neat academic paradigms.

Program solutions designed to attack the increasingly complex array of stressors that families, children, and individuals are facing in contemporary society have become multisystemic, multisymptomatic, and constant in their changing nature. One could read academic literature and on-the-market "fix-it" books and still lack an adequate background to coach anyone on how to remedy these problems. *(For an overview of these current problems, look to the ongoing "Kids Count" data reports: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011)*.

Only through immersion in the field; through the experience of engagement with agencies, programs, and their clients; and through careful observation and listening can one truly build the collaborative skills necessary for effective engagement. What human service agencies desperately need are partnerships.

In reality, a truly engaged scholar should be a collaborator whose curiosity and skill allow him or her to observe the problem from multiple individual and systemic dimensions, and whose experience in so doing is merely a tool he or she brings to the collaboration that is used to assist the other collaborators in owning the problem or condition, and in designing and testing a solution to it. If the intended goals are to both immerse students in the best of field learning and experience and to boost the relevance of the academic institution in the eyes of constituencies, faculty members must make changes in their relationships to the institutions, programs, consumers, and communities with whom they engage. Otherwise, they risk the fate of irrelevance.

Toward a Reactive and Radical Approach to Engaged Scholarship

The need for universities to dramatically alter how scholars discover and disseminate knowledge has been well-documented. As Lerner and Simon *(1998)* put it, "universities must change from their currently perceived (and in several respects, actual) status as

enclaves for ethereal elitism" *(p. 4)*. This realization has led many universities to reinvigorate a quest for relevance in their communities and states, and even globally *(Stanton, 2008).*

The difference between "ethereal elitism" in current practice and the world envisioned by proponents of "engaged scholarship" like Van De Ven *(2007)* seems to be taking the same researcher-driven design (i.e., researcher driven questions, researcher driven hypotheses and goals, researcher driven answers, and researcher driven conclusions) and replicating this design in the field environment. The obvious barrier to this researcher-based collaboration is that human service agencies have become resistive to approaches in which a researcher steps out from the halls of academia and professes to understand the needs of the community without first experiencing immersion in the field.

For many practitioners and community members, this approach is misguided and demeaning. The days of the academic institution dictating to human service practitioners what they need or should be doing are gone. Communities expect collaboration in which the researcher becomes a true collaborator who can both coach and listen; who engages in the problem from all perspectives; who assists the collaborative team in understanding the context in which the problem occurs and the strengths of the community, agency, or client to overcome it; and who then helps the collaborators adjust their potential and resources to address the problem.

"Communities expect collaboration in which the researcher becomes a true collaborator. . . ."

At this point, the researcher uses his or her academic persona to help measure the change made by the collaborator. The last stage in what the author considers radical, enmeshed research is that the researcher and student collaborators can then share this change with the university, thus continually updating all facets of academic knowledge, research, practice, and teaching.

About the Approach

A reactive and radical approach to engaged scholarship is based on a belief in the fundamentals of outreach scholarship. The approach works toward transformation of the community, transformation of the researcher and students, and, through the process, a transformation in the nature of the academic institution and how

it is viewed by constituents. The approach differs from Lerner and Simon's *(1998)*, Stanton's *(2008)*, and Van de Ven's *(2007)* in (1) the extent of immersion by the researcher, (2) the expectations of community and academic change, and (3) the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the collaborators. Rather, this approach to engagement is *reactive*. The chrono-system (or the influences of the social era or happenings, trends and events of the immediate time in which the engagement takes place; *(Bronfenbrenner, 1994*) is crucial to the process of engagement. Real-life issues require immediate analysis, intervention, effect measurement, and change. For example, if a bullying epidemic is being perceived as causing child suicides, the situation cannot wait for a longitudinal analysis and a five-year study.

This approach to engagement is also *radical*. Building on the frameworks of action research *(Greenwood and Levin, 1998)* and later the concept of feminist action research *(Reid, 2004)*, radical outreach calls for researcher immersion and "enmeshment" in a problem to gain a clearer understanding, followed by radical transformation in the community members, in the researchers and students, and eventually in the institutional learning community.

The major difference between a reactive and radical approach and other forms of engaged scholarship is the extent to which it immerses the researcher in a community's problems. The faculty member becomes enmeshed with the community and collaborators. The term *enmeshment* arose from the works of family systems pioneer Minuchin *(1974)*, who used it to mean "diffused boundaries." In the academic setting, enmeshment, or the breaking down of "silos" between the researcher, the community, the human service provider, and the clients, allows understanding of a problem from all sides. Enmeshment in solving a problem is the purest form of collaboration, in which all those sitting at the table work toward the same goal as equals. A reactive and radical approach to engaged scholarship places the emphasis for scholarship on finding a lasting transformation of a community's ability to solve a problem.

Eight Steps in a Reactive and Radical Approach to Engaged Scholarship

1. Reactive matching and real collaboration. The most important and most delicate part of any engaged scholarship endeavor is the creation of collaboration. The onus is on the faculty member to begin the collaborative process. This cannot be accomplished from within the institution. It is a combination of following one's

personal passions and curiosities, finding those in the community who are actively involved in those areas, and then inviting practitioners to the academy. The research team becomes a regular observer in the community.

Reactive matching requires discussions and active listening. It is the matching of passions among all participants including practitioners, policy makers, and advocates. It is both personal and professional in nature. Successful collaborators recognize several necessary aspects of collaboration, including

- **interactive leadership.** No one entity, be it a funding entity, community, or university, owns "the right" to direct a collaborative partnership. Leadership rests in the member who has the tools, instruments, or need at each critical juncture in a project.
- **the importance of relationships.** A common passion unites collaborators, and that passion to serve is the basis for relationships necessary to attack the problem. Trust is the key ingredient for success of any collaboration, and that trust is based on a principle of mutual respect for each partner's strengths and needs.
- **conflict and stress are expected.** Any collaborative relationship based on passion will eventually create conflict and stress. These are actually healthy signs of collaboration, and as the collaborators commit to work through them, trust and mutuality are fostered.
- **universities, researchers, or funders cannot force collaboration.** Collaboration is a natural process that grows from mutual respect, trust, and the need of each member to pool limited resources to improve the lives of others.

An example of a reactive and radical approach to engaged scholarship occurred in 2009, when a group of mothers in New Hampshire formed a coalition to call for reform in the school policies and state laws regarding bullying. This was a dire need of a group of parents. When they contacted the university to see if there were researchers who might join their effort, a family life and family policy specialist with the University of New Hampshire's Cooperative Extension service responded.

The specialist assessed the problem, compared New Hampshire law with other state and national laws, policies, and existing research. He then assisted in drafting a new law and provided

evidence to the legislature in support of the proposed legislation. Although not produced by a traditional peer-reviewed process, the resulting legislation, which was enacted by New Hampshire's 420-member legislature in 2010, had a positive outcome. The law clearly defined bullying and required schools to deal more effectively with bullying incidents.

2. Experiential observation and listening. Once collaboration has been envisioned, the task of the faculty member is to become silent. Before asking questions, the most important thing an engaged scholar can do is observe the problem to ascertain the context of the interacting systems causing the need.

The purpose of this observation is to ensure that the faculty member is a good fit as a collaborator.

State child support policies are often fraught with contentious battling factions. In New Hampshire, the process of reviewing and updating the state guidelines used by state agencies and courts to decide who should support the children of divorce stalled, caught between contentious political attacks between fathers' rights groups and women's advocacy groups. Consequently, there had been no substantial updating to the state's policies since 1982, even though the nature of divorce and shared parenting, formulas for calculating costs of raising children, and the social issues revolving around child support had all changed drastically. What was called for was radical engagement and reactive scholarship.

When the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension received a $110,000 state contract to provide a mandated review of New Hampshire's child support formula, a team devised several ways to solicit input from key constituents. They surveyed judges and attorneys; provided six community forums across the state and took individual testimony at each; and went to legislative groups, special interest groups, and citizens and provided various means for each to give input into the process.

In other words, the team became a skilled listener, a partner in the process of expression and advocacy for both sides. The scientific rigor, the perception of fairness and impartiality that quantitative and qualitative methodology brought to the table was cathartic for all sides in the debate. The process was unstuck by the fact that advocates, lawyers, judges, and those who had been caught in the bureaucracy created by the child support system felt rigorously heard. The result was six pieces of legislation that dramatically altered the methodology for child support in New Hampshire and more fairly supported children of divorce.

3. Radical immersion and enmeshment. After observing the need, condition, or problem, the faculty member must become immersed and enmeshed with those who encounter it. The faculty member will also examine all sides of the issue from academic journals to popular press, from newspaper and internet accounts to firsthand perceptions.

It is imperative that, when appropriate, students be brought into this immersion so that their observations, reflections, and conduits of learning influence the researcher's perception of the problem and vice versa. Enmeshment means that the researcher sits as an equal member and learner in meetings, hearings, client sessions, scholarly discussions, and internet and social media discussions with all of the collaborators. In addition, it is the responsibility of the faculty member to ensure that all collaborators have access to university resources: data, libraries and journals, technology, and students.

The guiding purpose of enmeshment is to break down the barriers between "client," "practitioner," "student," and "scholar." The process of enmeshment fuses the trust of all collaborators and focuses their respective perspectives and talents on transformation of the social condition.

For example, in a recent study conducted examining work and family "fit" or "balance" of parents in New Hampshire, working parents were interviewed during focus groups hosted at family resource centers and through phone surveys. The voices of these parents, many struggling with issues like transportation, childcare, housing, and family stress, culminated in a series of state regulations, business regulations, and publications aimed at businesses.

4. Collaborative needs analysis and logical methods. The faculty member in a collaborative partnership should not be the dictator of needs assessment formats, logic models, or products of engaged scholarship. Information is useful to the practitioner and community when the community members determine it is useful. A faculty member can *facilitate* the development of a logic model, and *suggest* methods, but should not solely determine the goals, objectives, and desired outcomes.

A reactive and radical approach to engaged scholarship is dependent on a mutual trust between the community members and the faculty member. The faculty member trusts the community members to identify the problem and produce the means to transform it, and the community members trust the faculty member to

be truthful and open in bringing together key collaborators, identifying strengths and roadblocks, and creating research questions.

In addition, the faculty member should never rely exclusively on quantitative or qualitative methods. Human service faculty members, in particular, recognize that case studies, focus groups, ethnographies, careful observations, and program evaluations are valid data collection mechanisms. Moreover, validation of the findings should be provided by the community members.

In recent years, New Hampshire county jails have been trying to radically change their approach to inmates. With dwindling county resources to support a costly county-based criminal justice system, officials and taxpayers are demanding that these institutions become more than just holding pens. A great deal of literature has focused on reducing risk or "Criminogenic" factors of inmates by using prevention education and treatment.

University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension had been an active partner in this process, but needed more than assumptions on which to base a preventative education process with inmates. Working carefully with jail officials and teams of inmates, Extension faculty members and Family Studies students designed a survey of inmates, given at intake to the jail, that would help identify what the inmates saw as their family-life needs.

The verbal survey was an option, yet when intake staff explained that the survey would help them and other inmates get education that could help them with family, parenting, and relationship issues, 95% of inmates in one county jail and 72% in the other volunteered to take the survey over a period of 6 months. They identified that they needed help with money management and participating in the "above ground" economy, that they needed help with parenting and child rearing skills, and that they wanted to know how to form better, stronger, and more positive relationships in their lives.

Extension listened, designed, and implemented programs in each area, and then went back to the inmates to gauge their interests. Participation had grown, and recidivism had dwindled. The collaboration worked.

5. Continuous assessment. During an engaged scholarship project, there should be a continuous feedback loop among the collaborators. The questions "Is this working?" and "How should we readjust our goals and objectives based on what we have learned, and what has changed?" should be constantly asked by participants.

For example, success in human service engaged research is really the measurement of personal transformation. It is based on

the notion that individuals, systems, and policies are intimately linked in either promoting or suppressing that transformation. Therefore, change is a growth process that is sensitive to the interactions between individuals and their ecology. The faculty member is concerned not only about changes made by the individual, but about how the treatment, intervention, program, or policy affects the relevant systems. The faculty member facilitates collaborative monitoring of both the individual participants and the systems in which the individuals interact. Ultimately, the faculty member must also measure the change that this research has made in his or her institution.

When designing a new collaborative family resource center and student laboratory for the study of parent education in Manchester, New Hampshire, Cooperative Extension devised a unique method for both assessing needs of the community and for gathering constant feedback on the collaborative's ability to meet those needs.

With the YWCA of New Hampshire, the key collaborator, a series of Friday ice cream socials were initiated for community leaders, parents, and community stakeholders. These were scheduled for Friday afternoons at the YWCA's easily accessed downtown location, and personal invitations were sent to key representatives of stakeholder groups, inviting them to bring friends.

During the informal conversations, team members would circulate among guests with a series of key questions relative to the needs, program strengths, and perceptions of service of the collaboration. The responses were written down by team members, coded, and analyzed for key and recurrent themes, feedback, and response.

Participants quickly caught onto the idea and would make sure to bring key constituents of the programming to share their perceptions, criticisms, and concerns of the programming. This method of constant feedback has become an integral part of the ongoing assessment of the program and has increased participation of parents who have been led by satisfied stakeholders to the resource center.

6. Communal transformation. The ultimate question for a faculty member doing reactive and radical engaged scholarship is, "What changed?" What transformations occurred in the lives of all the individuals involved in the endeavor?

Measuring communal transformation is not easy. Many different assessments need to be conducted, including assessments of the perceptions of all those directly involved, of media outlets, and

of policy makers as well as those who promote homeostasis in the ecology of the project.

Transformation can often be minute, but hopeful. For example, a reactive and radical outreach and engagement initiative may not eliminate homelessness in a community, but it may create a pathway through which families can find employment, and thus begin a process of transformation. It may not eliminate bullying in a school, but it may start a path that will one day result in elimination of the problem. In short, in order for engaged scholarship to be radical, it must promote transformation in the community. It is up to the members of the partnership to measure the value, importance, and depth of the transformation.

For example, since 2007, senior undergraduate and graduate students in a University of New Hampshire Family Policy class have been required to attend and participate in the state's Summit on Children's Issues. The students are required to research the issues that are affecting families and children in New Hampshire, and to apply that knowledge by assisting the Children's Alliance, an advocacy group of children and family agencies, in devising an annual list of legislative priorities. Over the past 3 years, more than eight new laws or policy changes have been enacted as a direct result of class projects. In exit interviews and teaching evaluations, the students reported that their participation was transformative in their academic careers, and members of the Children's Alliance reported that the student input and testimony was valuable to the legislative process.

7. Radical dissemination. Two fundamental beliefs of the faculty member, both rooted in feminist action research *(Reid, 2004)*, are (1) that all research is biased, and (2) that all research is political in nature. With those beliefs in mind, a faculty member promotes transformation by drawing attention to it.

Faculty members understand that community members who invest in public institutions want to see the fruit of their investments, not have them buried in obscure academic journals. Therefore, the faculty member welcomes media involvement, public discourse, debate, and input, and promotes the work or the collaborative. All participants in the engagement endeavor should benefit from this information dissemination. The faculty member should also advocate for the diverse forms that engaged scholarship products take. For example, blogs, newspaper articles, and radio or television talk shows are venues where practitioners, funders, and other non-academics increasingly gather their news.

The issue of work and family "fit" or balance has been an increasing concern of the University of New Hampshire. As part of the ongoing investigation, the researcher and others have been involved in a legislative policy committee concerned about the intersection of family life and work life. As a result, a considerable opportunity has been presented over the past four years to advocate for change in how companies regard the non-work lives of their employees.

In 2008, the researcher began to write a monthly column in the *New Hampshire Business Review*, a popular trade journal about work and family life research. In addition, the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension began to host a series of annual conferences for business professionals and legislators on work and family life. Cooperative Extension also became the host agency for the Sloan Award for excellence in work and family life work, which is a prestigious national award given to businesses for their accomplishments in work-life balance.

Suddenly, the researcher and his colleagues became featured speakers at business luncheons, chamber of commerce meetings, and other business-type venues as well as at non-profit family-serving agency meetings. As a result, in part, of this increased visability, the research team was asked to examine work and family stress factors experienced by working parents in New Hampshire. The results may be used to inform future legislation. The opportunities provided by relationships with these new stakeholders for the university and for the students were obvious. Suddenly, yogurt companies and engineering firms were seeing a whole new relevance for the university's work. Chief executive officers began asking if they could speak to a class on family policy.

8. Personal growth and transformation. The radical passion that drives a faculty member to investigate and facilitate community collaboration is a deep desire to better understand the world, and a deep commitment to making personal transformation through discovery. The faculty member must also ask: "What's in this for me?" "Will it further my passion?" "Will it feed my desire for altruism?" "Will it give me a legacy?" "Will it alleviate my academic homeostasis?" In a reactive and radical approach to engaged scholarship, faculty members should measure their personal transformation and growth.

The researcher was a part of all of the previous examples mentioned in this article over the past four years. The result has been that instead of coming to a new university and being isolated in the

cold confines of the ivory tower, the researcher developed friends, collaborators, and trusted confidants in the worlds of business, in politics, in the researcher's chosen field of human service, and across the campus.

Radical outreach and reactive engagement has allowed the researcher to help prisoners stay out of jail; be a founder of a parent resource center and student laboratory; to co-write legislation that has made children safer and more secure; to be a columnist and a frequent media guest; and, most importantly, to see how research can make a difference in people's lives. However, best of all, this approach has led to great stories, wonderful collaborators, and real world research to share with my students, to engage them with, and to arouse their passion to radical outreach and reactive engagement.

Conclusion

A reactive and radical approach to engaged scholarship changes the community, academic institution, researcher, and students. It breaks down the barriers that exist between research and action. It builds trust, loyalty, and lasting relationships between stakeholders and the university. It transforms the researcher into a meaningful social changer.

Reactive engagement and radical outreach offer a clear path for engaged faculty members to become more relevant to the communities with which they are partnering. It allows institutions to become more visible and useful to their constituencies. Finally, it offers research projects that teach university students – through immersion – ethics, values, and collaborative and critical thinking skills.

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About the Author

Malcolm Smith is the Family Life and Family Policy Specialist at the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. He is also an Associate Extension Professor in the Department of Family Studies who is active in research about bullying and peer victimization in children; work and family life issues; reduction of criminogenic factors among inmate populations; and the science of outreach and engagement. He earned his bachelor's degree in Education and Communication Arts from Washburn University, his master's degree in Education from Minnesota State University, and his Ph.D. in Family Studies and Human Services from Kansas State University.