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Susan J. Bracken
North Carolina State University, USA

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Recommended Citation

Bracken, Susan J. (2005). "Take a Good, Long Look in the Mirror: Adult Education, Praxis, and the Scholarship of Engagement," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/roundtables/17>

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Take a Good, Long Look in the Mirror: Adult Education, Praxis, and the Scholarship of Engagement

Susan J. Bracken

North Carolina State University, USA

The scholarship of engagement is seemingly congruent with adult education disciplinary values yet few adult education scholars appear to be actively shaping the discourse and practice of the scholarship of engagement. This preliminary work explores the reasons why adult education scholars may not be involved, and suggests reasons to consider more visible adult education participation.

Background

Adult education has a notable history in studying and participating in social movements, social action, and critical theoretical analysis. Scholars in the field, such as Welton (1987) and Cunningham (2000) often challenge us to include in our reflective practice a return to our roots through forthright appraisal of the congruency between our espoused values and values we actually demonstrate in our daily academic practice. Wilson and Hayes (2000) remind us of the “Aristotelian distinction between *techne*, which has to do with making things, and *praxis*, which has to do with acting properly in a moral and political sense,” (Bernstein in Wilson & Hayes, 2000). From my perspective, “acting properly in a moral and political sense” includes critically reflecting upon whether our practice runs the risk of being esoteric, without meaningful community involvement. I define our community as both our grassroots communities-at-large and our professional university communities.

Sandmann (2004) presented an AERC roundtable on the concept of the scholarship of engagement, asking important questions, “To what extent are adult educators involved in the scholarship of engagement?” and “How are adult educators framing their community work as scholarship?” Brookfield’s (2000) key concept of critically reflective practice is “critical reflection as the illumination of power”. As a part of my critically reflective practice, the question regarding adult education involvement in the scholarship of engagement becomes: How do I choose to exercise my power and to share my knowledge and experience within the field of adult education and with the community?

Defining the Scholarship of Engagement

The scholarship of engagement exists as an area of study, primarily in the discipline of higher education, and also as a practice for academic researchers of all disciplines. Boyer (1996) writes that the scholarship of engagement reflects, in action, the sharing or connection of university resources to solve important social and political issues in current society. As this concept has evolved, it is distinguished as more than professional service to the community; it includes faculty praxis in conducting mutual, reciprocal, and collaborative community-based research. The scholarship of engagement places a value upon engagement that places community-based groups and organizations with university researchers, learning from each other while jointly solving community-based problems. For the researchers, traditional areas of academic responsibility (teaching, research, and service) are integrated. Further, their perspective honors a commitment to community-based activity that is community-university driven rather than simply university-driven.

There is an increased interest in understanding, encouraging and rewarding faculty who practice the scholarship of engagement. This effort has come primarily from university administrators and from the academic discipline of higher education. The research thus far is generally focused on: 1) defining and describing scholarship of engagement activities from a

range of academic disciplines and community-based groups, 2) identifying organizational mechanisms to support and reward faculty and universities who practice the scholarship of engagement; and 3) identifying resources to support engagement activity. There are many unexplored research issues which are critical to the scholarship of engagement. We need to reach deeper understandings of what it means to truly engage collaboratively with community-based organizations, particularly from a critical theoretical lens, something which is a strength and area of commitment within adult education. We need deeper understandings of how adults can solve societal challenges through community-based partnerships with universities.

Adult Education Involvement in the Scholarship of Engagement

Why are adult educators not more systematically involved within their academic communities in publicly supporting the scholarship of engagement? If we, as adult educators, are willing to sidestep this issue, then what field more appropriately should be conducting integrated community-based research and practice? On the one hand, we are not so different than our academic colleagues. The pressures of academic institutional expectations make it difficult to imagine adding another layer of responsibility or change in perspective. It is simpler to mentally separate community service than it is to conceptualize integrating scholarship and to share critical reflections with others. These are very real factors to contend with.

On the other hand, an additional barrier to more widespread adult education involvement with the scholarship of engagement may be that we have our own disciplinary norms and interpretations of what *real social change* looks like. Perhaps it isn't counter-culture or grassroots enough to include university mechanisms in the mix? Perhaps the scholarship of engagement's roots in higher education lead us to judge it as unimportant? Are we already active in community-based research, with the scholarship of engagement as an unknown label or a label to avoid? It may be imperfect, but there is a real opportunity to create and reward socially-meaningful scholarship across disciplines, to increase its activity. In the end, we are making a choice not to share our knowledge and experience base of adult learning, of social change, and of community-based education and organizing within university communities. We are allowing others to shape the engagement path, without our active involvement.

While the concept of the scholarship of engagement may be relatively new, evolving in the 1990s, the power of meaningful educational practice has long been valued in the adult education field. Adult education could offer valuable contributions to others and adult education scholars could potentially enjoy socially meaningful scholarship should we choose to become an active voice in the scholarship of engagement movement.

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