Chapter 4

Teaching as We Learn:
Mentoring Graduate Students in Engaged Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, universities are embracing engaged scholarship as a vehicle for research that is “meaningful” and capable of reaching beyond the walls of academia to bring about a positive impact on society. While this shift toward citizen scholars is taking place philosophically in institutions of higher education across the United States (e.g., Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate), few faculty have experience or training in the implementation of engaged scholarship and are, thus, reticent to both attempt this research paradigm and teach students about it. Given such a conceptual chasm, this chapter examines issues encountered by two faculty while working with graduate students to conduct engaged scholarship and provides observations about mentoring students into this paradigm of research. Through a self-study constructed as a bricolage, insights into mentoring graduate students through processes of building trust, collective discovery, meaningful impact, and publishing are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Engaged scholarship cuts across university missions of teaching, research, and service to construct knowledge through multidirectional collaboration with communities to solve complex problems and enhance the public good (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco & Swanson, 2016). Central to engaged scholarship is the importance of positioning community partners as peers who participate in all phases of research (Peterson, 2009; Danley & Christiansen, 2019). Thus, engaged scholarship is driven by civic responsibility and is imbued with democratic and emancipatory ideals.

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Engaged scholarship is increasingly becoming a part of the mission of universities where faculty are encouraged to “apply their expertise to real-world problems and collaborate with peers in other sectors who also bring their knowledge and wisdom to the table in order to generate, disseminate, and apply new knowledge” (Gelmon, Jordan & Seifer, 2013, p. 59). Despite growing institutional commitment, there is still much work to be done to incorporate the philosophy of engaged scholarship into academic policies and practices at research-intensive universities (O’Meara, 2008; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008; Wenger, Hawkins, & Seifer, 2012). Historically, notions of scholarship have prioritized basic or scientific research over professional and liberal arts curricula due to the perceived notion that these activities provide more external funding and prestige (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006). Similarly, promotion and tenure criteria value the quantity of publications and grants awarded rather than the cultivation of community-based relationships (O’Meara, 2008; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Doctoral students are acculturated into these values for measuring professional performance and perpetuate them when they become faculty members (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006).

While there is “clear evidence that community engagement is becoming embedded in undergraduate academic programs” there is less evidence that doctoral programs are keeping pace with socializing students into conducting engaged scholarship (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006, p. 3; see also Tarantino, 2017). Within traditional views of scholarship, graduate students are trained to approach their research in an insular fashion and are “thus more likely to become disconnected from communities (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006, p. 12). The expectations for the Ph.D. degree requires students to become independent scholars and produce an individual research product (O’Meara, 2008, p. 27). This dominant perception of scholarship has also led to Colleges of Education approaching research in a singular manner even though graduate students and faculty often work directly with communities. While we mentor students to conduct research in the community, traditionally we do not mentor students to “see engaged scholarship” as a possibility (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006, p. 14).

For example, in our specialized field of literacy education, a wide and deep research base has been established involving outreach (Parks & Goldblatt, 2000). Literacy researchers frequently venture into the field to provide intervention services and/or determine the effects of these interventions on classrooms (Berkeley & Larson, 2018; Graham et al., 2018) or teacher professional development (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). However, in most research designs, researchers position participants as bystanders to the research methodology. Researchers also tend to position themselves as “experts” of literacy pedagogy concerned with evaluating the ways theory or instruction influences practice. Thus, literacy researchers often find themselves providing instruction directly to classroom students or engaging in various forms of professional development with teachers. Rarely do literacy researchers conduct studies in which participants and communities play a significant role in developing the direction of research.

One exception to this tradition is the methodology of teacher research, which has had wide application in literacy research for over two decades (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Teacher research was a movement to legitimize teachers as generators of knowledge about pedagogical practices through enacting systematic and intentional inquiry into their practice. It occurs within the “context of broad-based efforts of school improvement” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 5). Cochran-Smith and Lytle viewed research as fundamentally social and constructive in nature and created a typology of teacher research that questioned relationships between “researchers and the researched” and established teacher inquiry as a legitimate form of knowledge construction (p. 40). Problems of practice have included topics such as how to increase children’s motivation to read, how to develop children as writers, how to select books at an appropriate level, and how to determine the effectiveness of various strategies on children’s abilities.
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