

An Experiment Into the Public Face of Education Scholarship

Or, How to Stop ‘Roiling Along’ Tenure and Promotion Tracks

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“You do it to yourself, you do and that’s what really hurts.”
- Radiohead

THE IRRELEVANCE of curriculum scholarship, or perhaps, just education scholars more generally, is in the air. The 6th Annual Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference in October, 2005, dedicated a full conference town-hall gathering to exploring in what ways education scholars might better engage in the work of “public intellectuality.” The theme of the 2006 conference of the American Educational Research Association, “Education Research in the Public Interest,” attempted to mine a related vein of concern. In an *Education Week* commentary (April 6, 2005), Stanford scholar Sam Wineburg gives voice to an apparently prevalent anxiety in and about the education research community:

I bring you, my fellow researchers, an upbeat message. We're doing a terrific job preparing future education researchers for a career of keeping out of people's hair! [...] To America's millions-strong teaching force, NCME, AERA, NARST, PES, and NSSE might well be noodles on the surface of alphabet soup [...] But we can't fall asleep at the job. Maintaining irrelevance demands a keen vigilance over curriculum and mission.

Allow me to suggest that laments for a lack of public influence by education scholars or scholarship produce more heat than light when we fail to attend to the conditions in which we operate that reduce our individual and collective capacities to engage in public intellectual work (as might even be enacted in our own faculties). To shed some light, I wish to propose an experiment into the multifaceted shades of scholarship in the public interest.

The experiment I propose calls for a self-imposed hiatus by professors from submitting new articles to journals for two years and, simultaneously, the refusal of journals to publish submitted articles from professors for two years. This proposal does not call for a hiatus on study and

research. This distinction between study and publishing is crucial and one made by William F. Pinar (2004) and first hinted at for me in a 1999 piece written by Robin Barrow.

In that piece, Barrow questions whether publications should have any role in a measurement of productivity in universities:

I am not going so far as to oppose writing and research. I am raising the question – because it ought to be someone who at least cannot be accused of sour grapes who does so – of whether we do not seriously overweight both [the] ideal [of creativity] and even more its actual value. At any rate, public production of professors’ findings might perhaps be slowed down a bit. (Barrow, 1999, p. 139)

Barrow further questions the cogency of debates over the relative weightings of merit in universities between teaching and research. Rather, he suggests universities and (at least some of) their citizens “should [...] think rather in terms of maintaining and disseminating understanding, and treat the emergence of new understanding as a contingent byproduct” (Barrow, 1999, p. 140). While “dissemination” is most commonly taken to mean publishing, as Barrow further explores, it perhaps need not be primarily so.

As one without reason for “sour grapes” in regards to publishing, and following Barrow’s reasoning about “contingent byproducts” as relates to the public face of our scholarship, this proposal seeks to do the following: to generate data and stimulate thought about the ways education professors might a) study a wider range of scholarship already being produced, so as to b) learn from what already exists within the field of education, and thereby, potentially, to c) more effectively participate in debates and disputes over the terms, images, ideals, and information that inform the public imagination of education.

By public intellectual work I mean to signal an engagement that is both private and public. This engagement in “complicated conversations” (Pinar, 2004) through “eclectic arts of inquiry” (Schwab, 1971) seeks to interpret and question the production of personal and public education experiences in particular local, national, and international contexts. An “eclectic arts of inquiry” refers to the use of diverse and multiple ways of investigating, interpreting, and communicating experiences of education. Likewise, public intellectual work is a conversation and argument over the terms by which private-public experiences become intelligible; a potential troubling of intelligibility that instantiates learning itself (Britzman, Dipbo, Searle, & Pitt, 1997; Caputo, 1987).

While there are many stakeholders with responsibilities for the state of current education, I wish here to experiment with one constituency – the education professorate. First, let me briefly describe an aspect of our institutionalized lives that I believe requires the fresh engagement of an experiment.

The English language education research community produces thousands of articles and books every year.¹ The best of these articles and books draw on a wide range of literature offering readers hefty and, when most provocative, eclectic bibliographies. For many of us, however, these contributions are unknown.² Or, perhaps, we can feign and nod knowingly at a conference over a glass of wine, having quickly read a review. In addition to the more quotidian reasons, this is so because we, more and less graciously, submit ourselves to an institutionally inherited tenure and promotion regime that creates a mindset characterized by job fear and vulnerability (which only exacerbates the vulnerability inherent in trying to think freshly about old problems). Institutionalized vulnerability and the conditions that contribute to it serve to reduce engagement with a broad body of scholarship:

But it is true, I think, and not only for education faculty, that too often books amount to currency in a careerist system, rendering secondary the intellectual content and scholarly accomplishment of the works. (Pinar, 2004, p. 171)

A “careerist system” discourages professors from reading widely, as inventive scholarship requires. Further, I suspect that Wineburg’s lament for scholars’ lack of influence in the public square results, at least in part, from our need to avoid reading work or engaging spaces for which we must always again become students. With a need for job security and further forms of recognition we simply cannot afford to slow production down.

The experiment I propose seeks to shed light on the following specific questions: First, in what ways can we advocate for an “eclectic arts of inquiry” in the institutions where our desks sit right now? Second, given that education as and for democracy resonates with cherished North American political ideals, in what ways could we collate research to encourage and inform public deliberation about democratic practices of education? In what ways could we measure the effects of such an impact on deliberation? Finally, in what ways would education professors describe the enhancement or diminishment of their intellectual lives during a hiatus from new publications?

Rather than published scholarship in journals, we might consider scholarship from professors during this experimental hiatus to include reading-reports of books, articles, art, and bureaucratic initiatives already created. These reports could be produced individually and in working scholarly groups (including interested members of the public, graduate students, teachers, and public school students) and could be reviewed by the appropriate tenure and promotion committees. There are also other possible types of engagements that might emerge.

One can envision professors during this experiment creating philosopher cafes, writing to and for newspapers, producing leaflets to inform deliberation about local political issues, addressing PTA meetings, attending teacher union meetings, and working as “scholars in residence” in schools. We also might direct more time to schools and communities in other countries to vary scholars’ life experiences and to inform local practices with those from elsewhere.

With redistributed time, this experiment could also elicit greater engagement with the relevant government bureaucracies in charge of setting the conditions that shape much of what goes on in schools (and, increasingly, in faculties of education), questioning presuppositions and evidence used as bases for their decisions. Each of us may, in fact, adopt a bureau during this hiatus with which to study, work, or interrogate as required. In doing so, in what ways would our studies and public engagement be enhanced?

This, then, in very broad strokes, is my proposal for an experiment. Let me turn now to questions people asked me about this proposal as an opportunity to flesh it out a bit more.

Isn’t original research a good in and of itself? Why are you setting up a dichotomy between publishing original research and public intellectuality?

This proposal does not call for an end to so called “original” research. It calls for a short journal publishing, not study, hiatus. In doing so, it seeks to experiment with expectations that might benefit from a fresh engagement. Two central expectations for tenure and promotion are for scholarship that is “original” and “specialized.”

Leaving aside the question of whether originality in scholarship should even be valued (Barrow, 1999), what, or rather, whose, criteria defines original? Reflecting on her tenure review, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1993) takes up the troubling notion of “original” as pertains to scholarship:

My concepts and theories should not be contaminated by those of others. They should be sterile. To get tenure, I should assist the review committees in isolating my mind from its normal contexts (such as my body and my social interactions...from the stirrings of life and community) for study. (p. 66)

Rather than original, a discredited concept to be sure, Ellsworth goes on to detail the personal and community costs paid by isolating scholarship from its “stirrings.” Attending to such stirring requires, amongst other conditions, a mixture of both solitude and community as Adam Howard notes in his Editor’s opening to this issue about the central place of community in the later work and life of his mentor Donald Oliver. My proposal would shed light on the question of whether we ought to maintain or expand inherited definitions of community with which we professionally associate. Another expectation from which we might benefit with fresh engagement concerns specialization.

Why, and in whose interest, is specialization such a cherished achievement? As R. Buckminster Fuller (1969) noted not so long ago, there is something potentially harmful about specialization:

But specialization is in fact only a fancy form of slavery wherein the “expert” is fooled into accepting his slavery by making him feel that in return he is in a socially and culturally preferred, ergo, highly secure, lifelong position. (p. 28)

Fuller argued throughout his globally influential career that a specialist-training limits people’s capacity to think comprehensively about challenges and opportunities facing human and environmental communities. As a skilled architect and inventor (and recipient of 46 honorary degrees from institutions across the world), he was an exemplar of disciplined inquiry at the cutting edge. He also understood that it was imperative to community (and personal?) well-being to balance depth (specialization) and scope (public intellectuality) (den Heyer, 2005). The latter is as necessary as the former. Following Fuller, Ellsworth, and Oliver, I wonder if we can have cutting edge “specialization” that would draw upon and contribute to the creation of communities stirring with a diverse set of interpretations and ideals for public education.

But isn’t scholarship that serves democracy about producing new knowledge?

Not so much. Scholarship and democratic life are also about listening and reading and creating forums for further dialogue, thought, and thought refinement. In other words, it is not a requirement of either scholarship or democratic life to continuously produce new knowledge or products (leaving aside a question of whether “new” is more accurately called “recent”). Rather, however variously defined and enacted, democracy and scholarship require time to consider the thoughts and perspectives of others; time being a commodity this proposal seeks to put to better service. Time is the equivalent in the academic business to money in present capitalist economic relations, not necessarily its scarcity, but its control and ill-distribution.

Isn’t what your proposal hopes to spark already being done?

Yes, I know it is and this work should inform discussions across present specializations. For example, conducting research for this proposal, I came across a vast literature in, among others, *The Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* on various forms of scholarly public engagement. Given both time and recognition this literature could be integrated by education scholars into the vocabulary of research fields such as literacy, early childhood education, history education, and curriculum studies. Such literature could inform the political processes that govern what sorts of testing regimes, pedagogies, textbooks, or what have you find their way into schools. Clearly, the best amongst us appear before commissions, give public lectures, and work with those in school. We should further encourage this by creating conditions

that make such engagements more, rather than less, likely (at least for the time of this experiment).

What about journals, what will they publish during this experiment?

I propose that journals offer their readership “retrospective” issues of significant work that their editorial board feels deserve reconsideration (and offer readers a rationale for doing so). I envision here theme issues in which articles from several decades dealing with a vital topic in the field are bounded together to enhance the historical perspective of their readership (which in turn become resources for teaching).

In what ways might we measure the success of this experiment?

This is an important question. How do we do it now? We don’t. Our relationships to public communities we allegedly serve remain more assumed than investigated (and indeed, more complex than we can ever finally read or measure). So, how might we at least make a good faith effort to do so?

We could survey professors of education for baseline data regarding public engagement in its multiple forms – work in schools and with commissions, bureaucracies affecting education, public debates, articles in popular presses, art performances and installations, and numbers of books and articles read – for comparative analysis following the experiment. Expanding this work would be autobiographies, ethnographies, and other studies employing a variety and mix of methods and methodologies to offer rich descriptions of “engagement,” “integration,” and “application” as forms of scholarship (Boyer, 1990). Other potential data sources include the internet and the promising work in the “science of networks” that maps “complex networks [and] the dynamic processes through which community members identify with one another, researchers collaborate, and ideas connect...” (Carolan & Natriello, 2005).

Carolan & Natriello (2005) suggest some interesting possibilities. They note, for example, that by applying the mapping of people’s purchasing patterns on Amazon.com to academics “[it could very well be] those who read qualitative studies are distinctly different from those who read quantitative studies – a structural hole – in the network that most would agree should be bridged” (p. 32). Would most “agree”? I do not know, but I agree with the thrust of their argument that scholarship would benefit greatly from a set of multiple perspectives on any educational question deemed of import. Yet, a scholarship of multiple perspectives – or a scholarship of “eclectic inquiry” – requires those acculturated into one or another methodology to read outside their expertise. This is precisely what our tenure and promotion expectations make less likely!

This experiment also serves then to instigate opportunities to learn about and employ a variety of methodologies and methods. For example, surveys would give the education community a sense of the number of engagements before and after the experiment, qualitative studies on the contours, complexities, and weight of engagement, and a science of mapping utilizing various Internet tools that would provide a sense of the scope of impact. Results of this experiment ought to be accessible and widely available through various outlets to both, simultaneously, create and inform interested publics.

The Public Knowledge Project (PKP) directed by John Willinsky at the University of British Columbia (and now, also, at Stanford University) provides an example of one such outlet.³ This project is dedicated to explore the ways:

educational research can serve as a more useful and relevant source of professional development and political deliberation. [This requires] forging links between research and related classroom practices, teachers’ experiences, curriculum resources, education

policies, and public reports, in ways that would enable educators and people generally to make sense and make choices, to take in the broader picture and to focus on the learning experience (Willinsky, 2001, p. 6).

The success of this vital project requires, however, thinking more experimentally about the ways we might go about our business. This and other outlets also allow scholars to do some very innovative work, helping to answer the question I raised at the beginning about ways we could collate research to encourage and inform diverse enactments of public education. What search terms might link, for example, ethnographic and statistical studies on a particular question or concern for broad public consumption?

As with scholars, members of the public will likely find different reports more compelling. Some will seek statistical or survey data while others will be more inclined towards thick description. Whatever organizing frameworks we develop will require time to read outside our present limits and towards a more rounded consideration of both our scholarly mission and its public face.

A Caveat and Summary

Despite appearances, it is not my intention to set up the public “we” might help create as a damsel in distress, an object of our own salvation narrative. Nor is this proposal meant to assuage any sense of our own emasculations. No one needs to be saved. Rather, part of our calling ought to include increasing both the quality and quantity of opportunities for ourselves and others to become better educated.

The professorate enjoys a relatively uncommon degree of freedom for laying the tracks of our own expectations or remaining tied to them. This proposal is itself an experiment if it has done nothing more already than spark indignant reaction amongst readers. I recognize that for some, connections between their work and the public are not relevant compared to their dedication to publishing specialized “cutting edge” or “new” research. For others, scholarship should concern itself with continuing the readership of a particular tradition of thought. After all, the problem does not lie with a community’s alleged irrelevance but with how relevance is commonly measured. I strongly support these points. However, these insights do not exclude the purpose of my proposal: to experiment with scholarship’s potential for “contingent byproducts” by experimenting with the terms of our own expectations and those of the research communities with which we presently identify. If, however defined, we are failing in our public service, and if this should be of concern, and if we are in part doing it to ourselves, then experimenting with how it might be otherwise seems like the scholarly thing to do. If this strikes the reader as an absurd proposal, no matter: I now have another line on my C.V. and that is what, after and above all, counts in our present system of accounting for scholarship and public service.

Notes

1. Led by Leela E. Balraj, education liaison librarian at Kent State University, books were searched using the following Library of Congress subject headings using the WorldCat database: Kindergarten; Primary education; Elementary or public school education; Secondary education; high schools; and higher education.

The total number English language of books published in 2004 with the subject headings listed above is **4,564**. Subject searches were run using the following subject terms and also limiting the searches to scholarly (peer-

reviewed) journals published in 2004 in the Professional Development Collection database: Kindergarten; Education, primary; Education, elementary; education, secondary; and education, higher

The total number of peer reviewed education articles published in 2004 that were indexed in the Professional Development Collection database with the subject headings listed above is **1,250**. This number is an approximate figure as some articles may have been listed more than once using several of the subject headings we searched under. Using the same database and subject headings, University of Alberta Librarian Patricia Rempel found that **1,322** peer-reviewed articles were published in calendar year 2007. She notes that “from one database vendor you will have little duplication [of articles in search results].”

While open to counter arguments, at this point this proposal only calls for a journal publishing hiatus of new articles, not books. I realize that books often emerge from the process of preparing and publishing articles. However, the purpose of the proposal is not to limit communication of scholarship but to create conditions for a redistribution of available time to increase communication through, among other means, reading. Further thought is also required as to whether, for example, graduate students hoping to pursue an academic life ought to be included in this hiatus. I suspect a suitable answer is no; that first authored graduate student articles be given the light of distribution and attention.

2. The range in which broad-minded eclectic-ness will be adequately measured or considered requires attention to the racial geographies that shape definitions of such as found, for example, in my/our bibliographies. See Gaztambide-Fernández (2006) for exactly why the time called for in this experiment is needed to move beyond a whitewashed academy production machine.

3. The Public Knowledge Project’s websites are available at <http://pkp.sfu.ca/>

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