

2013

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Recommended Citation

Daniels, George L. (2013) "A Five-Step Model for “Unconventional Engagement”," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol6/iss1/7>

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A Five-Step Model for “Unconventional Engagement”

George L. Daniels

Abstract

Why subject third graders to the scrutiny of scholars at an academic conference? As one example of “unconventional engagement,” *The Oakdale Eagle*, a newsletter established in 2011 as a result of a partnership initiated by a local elementary school, demonstrates the value of higher education responding to a call from the community. Not associated with a service-learning class or academic research but involving college students and faculty from The University of Alabama and Stillman College, this partnership exemplified the power of volunteerism and community service. The highlight occurred when third graders, who were among the first to write stories for *The Oakdale Eagle*, made a presentation at the 2012 National Outreach Scholarship Conference in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In addition to contrasting conventional and unconventional community engagement, this article charts the five steps in a unique community-initiated partnership.

Introduction

A report by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) found over 70% of all college students participate in some form of volunteering, community service, or service-learning. This widely circulated report included a national call to make civic and democratic learning an expected outcome for all college students and integral to their education. In essence, the authors proposed that community engagement should extend throughout one’s educational career, placing students, not educators, at the center of community engagement and requiring new players, new platforms, new methods, and potentially new outcomes. Grounded in the literature on community engagement, this manuscript describes a five-step process for “unconventional engagement.” It tells the story behind third graders creating a publication and delivering a presentation at the 2012 National Outreach Scholarship Conference (NOSC) on the same program with college presidents, tenured professors, and a U.S. ambassador. These third graders exemplify the new players and the newsletter they produced the new platform and methods of engagement, setting the stage for new outcomes.

Notions of Engagement

Some maintain that engagement essentially means people genuinely listening to each other across boundaries for the purpose of solving complex societal problems. This definition comes from the community of land-grant institutions

operating with an extension mission where “public dollars for public good” is a basic tenet (Bull, Anderson, Payne, & Foster, 2004).

For engagement to be authentic, it must reflect collaborative work; require active involvement in communities; value diversity of people, expertise, and culture; utilize authentic processes for learning; and embed itself in democracy and collaborative leadership (Collins, 2011). Some argue that engagement should be transformative in nature, in the manner of public health (Brown et al., 2006; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Transformative engagement is not only a transfer of expertise from university to community and community to university, but is also a process in which all partners apply critical thinking to complex community problems (Brown et al., 2006). This process occurs in a series of iterations that can begin with a request from the community for assistance with a specific problem or need. Early success in solving the problem or meeting the specific need, coupled with the learning that occurs in the process, leads partners to understand that they need more information, which leads to deeper engagement (Brown et al., 2006).

Community-based research in public health is a collaborative approach that equitably involves community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). At Michigan State University, this notion of transformation is reinforced in its definition of university outreach by acknowledging the larger society’s rapid and fundamental transformation,

which requires higher education's active and creative involvement (Provost's Committee, 1993). The report operationalized at Michigan State, originally released two decades ago, listed three common foundations of engagement: Engagement is reciprocal; the missions of research, teaching, and service are fully integrated; and all engagement is scholarly—both in terms of acts and products.

One of the most-cited concepts is Boyer's (1996) multiple forms of the scholarship of engagement—discovery, learning, engagement, and integration. His last published article, written before his death in 1995, was written for the first edition of what is now the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*. Boyer challenged colleges and universities to become more engaged with the most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems in communities, and with public education in particular.

Barker (2004) attempted to define the scholarship of engagement using a taxonomy of five emerging practices, suggesting a problem-driven, pluralistic approach. He developed his taxonomy after a review of the literature, as well as reviews of websites, publications by civic engagement centers at higher education institutions, and interviews with practitioners. Those five practices were public scholarship, participatory research, community partnership, public information networks, and civil literacy scholarship.

According to Sandmann (2006), scholarship should be the foundation on which community-based engagement is conceptualized, implemented, assessed, and communicated. In the purest sense of the word, "scholarship" is what is being done, while "engaged scholarship" is how it is being done, and, for the common or public good, what end it is done. Engaged scholarship differs from traditional scholarship in purpose, the questions driving it, and in the design, analysis, and dissemination of results.

Defining Unconventional Engagement

UA students working on *The Oakdale Eagle* project were earning no class credit; thus, the project falls outside of service-learning. In fact, that is one way the partnership described in this report adds something new to the literature. Since it's not another service-learning class and the partnership was not initiated by a university faculty member looking for an innovative teaching tool, there was no research agenda identified prior to the partnership being established. To date, no data

have been collected at the site of the partnership. If there is just an opportunity for engagement based on the genuine listening to people and no assessment or evaluation in advance, does that mean no engagement took place? What if the emphasis were on the impact on the volunteering journeys of the players and the benefits to the community organization (Gray, 2011)? That it is where the focus of this case study lies.

While Sandmann (2006) suggested that scholarship should be the foundation for framing community engagement, this study offers an unconventional approach that places the scholarship, the contributions to the body of knowledge, as secondary to the relationships that were initiated strictly for the purposes outlined by the community partner and the benefits of the engagement assistance they receive. The contrasts between unconventional and conventional engagement are depicted in Table 1. These contrasts are positioned along five dimensions: the initiator of the engaged partnership, the director of the engaged partnership, the role of scholarship, the role of university teaching, and the link to the service mission of the university or representative of the academy. Next, we examine each of the five dimensions of the differences between conventional and unconventional engagement.

1. Partnership Initiation. In likening campus-community partnerships to interpersonal relationships, Bringle and Hatcher (2002) explain that initiation can be planned or serendipitous. A request from a community agency seeking volunteers can potentially result in an enduring partnership. Two parties with common interests can be attending the same meeting and coincidentally end up in a partnership. When it comes to who initiates the partnership or the engagement, in unconventional engagement the community partner is the initiator. This means no pre-conceived objectives of the academy will drive the direction of the relationship. Instead, the initiator is the driver of the relationship, which takes us to the second dimension of this model.

2. Partnership Direction. Scholars are often guilty of "subjugating our community partners as passive recipients in community-based engagement..." (Bortolin, 2011, p. 56). It is hard to imagine an engagement experience where the tables are turned and the timeline, needs, and, ultimately, the direction of the

Table 1. Factors in Conventional Vs. Unconventional Engagement Scholarship

Conventional	Unconventional
Partnership initiated by academy	Partnership initiated by community
Project directed by scholar	Project directed by community partner
Primary purpose is research	Research is secondary purpose
Teaching model is service-learning	Teaching model is volunteerism
Service mission is reciprocal	Service mission is reciprocal

partnership is almost entirely a product of the community partner’s needs and interests. Here, unconventional engagement would mandate that the community partner be at least equal since the partner is the director of the partnership. As in an interpersonal relationship, a partnership structured this way will benefit from constant monitoring and an advisory group that could guard against inappropriate dependency or power differences and extensive interdependency.

3. Scholarship Role. As Sandmann (2006) suggested, in engaged scholarship there is a tendency to steer away from a model of isolation and toward one where the community partners are consumers before “the work” even starts. What if the work isn’t producing scholarship at all, or if it is, only as a secondary goal? If the community partner is both the initiator and the director of the partnership, “the work” is primarily the service. Instead of having a scholar at the head of the table, that role is filled by a community member and the project goals set accordingly.

4. University Teaching Role. An engaged student is an active citizen, who, at a university, might be involved in community-based projects. But as Ward and Moore (2010) explain, the term “engagement” encompasses activities students participate in not only to foster community engagement but are also used to describe a state of being. Furco (1996) explained that there are five types of experiential education activities through which students can participate in the community. Community service-learning is just one of them. A credit-bearing experience tied to learning goals or objectives would reflect conventional engagement. Here, we define unconventional engagement as experiential education that it not necessarily part of a class or credit-bearing experience.

5. Service Mission Link. The one dimension where there is little difference between conventional and unconventional approaches to engagement is the service mission link. Outreach can be considered academy-centered with the scholars reaching out to those who benefit (Fear, Rosaen, Foster-Fishman, & Bawden, 2001). Or outreach can be reciprocal with partners, engaging in ways to reflect mutual interaction and input (Brown, Reed, Bates, Knaggs, Casey, & Barnes, 2006). The synonymous nature of outreach and engagement was exemplified by a Penn State official who characterized outreach scholarship at his school as extending university resources through local engagements (Ryan, 2001).

With an understanding of the differences between conventional and unconventional engagement, the next step is to further explicate the unconventional engagement project under study. The steps in our unconventional engagement project are depicted in Table 2. They trace the partnership among Oakdale Elementary School, Stillman College, a private historically black college in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and The University of Alabama, a research institution, that led to a presentation at NOSC 2012 by Oakdale Elementary School students.

Elements of Engagement in an Elementary School Newsletter Project

This unconventional engagement story did not end with the conference presentation, however. In fact, after the conference, the students would go on not only to write about that experience in the next issue of *The Oakdale Eagle*, but also position the publication as a vehicle for direct reporting on engagement activities at their school. The issue published immediately following NOSC included an account written by one of the student presenters:

Table 2. Steps in an Unconventional Engagement Scholarship Case Study

Step 1: Community Connection (invitation issued)

The *Oakdale Eagle* story starts with a talk between a second grade teacher and a university professor who had visited Oakdale Elementary as a volunteer. The teacher suggested journalism as enrichment in a four-week elementary school summer curriculum in 2011. The professor made presentations to support journalistic assignments—news stories and photos that could be published in a newsletter. Quickly, rising third graders were conducting interviews—journalism's principal methodology—learning new terms, writing and rewriting stories, shooting with a digital camera, and typing and editing stories on a computer using Microsoft Word. The teacher and professor imposed a newsletter design for publication. As the program ended, the first issue was distributed around the school. A second teacher came on board in the fall. Three more editions were produced as the successful partnership was recognized by the local university.

Step 2: A Community Partnership Award and Initial Field Trip to the University

In spring 2012, the teachers who initiated the partnership and their students won a University of Alabama award for Community Partner-Initiated Engagement Effort, receiving "seed money" to sustain the project for four more issues. True to their training, the young staff recorded the impact of attending the awards program in *The Eagle*. An Eagle staffer interviewed a university vice president in charge of the awards program and reflected in *The Eagle* in these words: "In April, several students who had helped with *The Oakdale Eagle* (received) an award. ...I had a wonderful experience.... I imagined that I had completed elementary school and had started college. It was as though I was a college student, and was a reporter there" (Sean Smith, third grade). As another school year began, students added social media to their repertoire through a closed, school-based social network. By summer's end, officials had made *The Oakdale Eagle* part of the after-school enrichment program, giving 45 third, fourth, and fifth grade students exposure to journalism.

Step 3: Partnership Expansion to Include New Players and Partners

With 45 students learning journalism after-school, pressure for support increased. The university professor reached out to university students and a colleague at Stillman College, a local historically black four-year liberal arts college with a journalism sequence. Stillman students accompanied by their professor helped expand the after-school program. In fact, both professors recruited college students for the after-school journalism program. Designed to promote professional development, students organizations proved ideal for community service. Volunteerism is typically expected of these groups. The UA Society of Professional Journalist chapter got involved, taking on the Oakdale students as a community partner in support of the publication. Weekly one-hour sessions were supplemented by two special writing activities tied to holidays. Over the course of the program, Oakdale students produced 98% of the stories. Only two articles—a principal's column and an announcement about upcoming events—were contributed by faculty. A four-page "New Faces" issue featuring new teachers and faculty was published in September 2012. An eight-pager was published in November, another eight-pager featuring events in the latter part of the fall semester in January 2013, and a 12-page issue featuring events from the winter and early spring in April 2013. As students cycled through writing and photography components of journalism, teachers hand-picked 25 students from the original group of 45 based on their level of engagement and participation in the first semester. This group included students from third, fourth, and fifth grade in the after-school program. A handful of articles and photos were submitted by students not in the after-school program. Even as the college students were working with third, fourth, and fifth graders after-school, the faculty member initially involved realized the importance of showcasing the partnership so that others could see its impact. Typically, this would be done with community-based participatory research. But, the elementary school teachers involved were not accustomed to doing or being involved with research. A proposal for NOSC 2012 was submitted by the professor. When it came time to present, the teachers deferred to the students. The third graders were accustomed to looking up information on the Internet and preparing PowerPoint presentations to showcase findings. Preparing this presentation was a matter of recounting what they had done in reporting and writing for *The Oakdale*

Eagle and adding from their stock of photos. The professor helped them prepare an outline. Their teachers followed up as they prepared the text. Numerous rehearsals were held to become comfortable before a large audience.

Step 4: Scholarship Developed

As students' prepared for their second visit to the University campus, the site of the conference, teachers had the ordeal of deciding who would accompany the two students presenting the project. After all, there were 45 students participating in the after-school journalism program. Was it fair that both presenters were from the third grade class and there were students at both the fourth and fifth grade level not involved? The decision was made to allow only two other students to attend and they would come from the fourth and fifth grade level. The other two students would be responsible for serving as ushers at the NOSC session distributing copies of *The Oakdale Eagle* for those in attendance. There were two presentations on community partnerships scheduled at the same NOSC time slot, the Oakdale students and one by Ph.D. students who had run another after-school program. The doctoral students quickly decided they did not want to follow the kids, who they assumed would "steal the show." The students presented *The Oakdale Eagle* story in flawless fashion. Afterwards, the spotlight turned on their teachers, who answered questions about research, ways to measure the effectiveness of the program, and motivating students. The school system's media relations director was on-hand for photos and videos from this big day. The two non-presenting students took turns using the digital SLR camera. Four students served as reporters for a future issue of *The Oakdale Eagle*. In a matter of 90 minutes, these third graders had made the single biggest presentation of their lives and were no doubt the youngest presenter in NOSC history. They had accomplished something many college students never do: presenting at a national academic conference. As is customary after scholarly conferences, the university faculty member proceeded to prepare a report for possible publication in an academic journal. What is not so customary, these third graders were also invited by the editors of *JCES* to submit a write-up. The faculty member met twice with the students to help them outline what they would include in their article and to divide up who would write what. Once the article was submitted and returned from the editor with questions and revisions for a "revise and re-submit," the faculty member met again with the two third graders. During this session, the students were introduced to the "Track Changes" feature in Microsoft Word, one their teachers/advisors for *The Oakdale Eagle* had not used in class. Familiar with computer word processing, the third graders quickly caught on to how to use the feature as they went through the questions and suggested edits from the *JCES* editor. The students completed revisions and re-submitted their manuscript.

Step 5: Sustainability Questions

When should an "unconventional" partnership end? Such a partnership would seem to be sustainable without continued heavy input from the university partner. As the second academic year of *The Oakdale Eagle* came around, the funds from the university award were depleted. Yet, there were plans for additional issues of the newsletter. Funds from another grant were re-allocated to continue the newsletter at least for two more issues. But questions of a long-term plan loomed. Participants from both sides agreed that school administrators be urged to find alternate funds to continue printing the publication. A track record had been established that could be "sold" to local businesses who might provide funds to continue to print the newsletter after its second year of existence. Further complicating the relationship, the University faculty member (the author) was named an assistant dean in his college, with additional duties. With the possibility of no university faculty involvement, the question was asked, Can the newsletter be sustained at the same level of quality without the participation of the university faculty member? Was the university administration able to commit other faculty resources to the partnership? Meanwhile, university student involvement in the second semester dropped off considerably, with only one student participating in the after-school sessions consistently. Would the voluntary model be sustainable over time? Or, would a service-learning class be needed, where students received academic credit as a means of continuous regular faculty and student involvement? As the 2014 academic year began, these critical questions had not been answered.

On Oct. 2, 2012, four students from Oakdale Elementary went to Hotel Capstone.... We talked about starting the newsletter and we explained how we interviewed teachers at the school. The audience smiled and seemed to enjoy the presentation.

—Joshua Patton, Staff Reporter, Third Grade

The newsletter was still active in 2013, as the eighth issue went to press early in the year. It included stories about students participating in a mock presidential election. President Barack Obama was the overwhelming favorite as students as young as Pre-K cast ballots on the same day as the rest of the nation. At the same

time, following a pre-election day assembly where each of the student candidates spoke, students voted for members of their student council. The student council was featured on the front page of the newsletter providing plantings for those they visited during the Christmas season. Another article was about a member of the Tuscaloosa City Council visiting the school as the keynote speaker.

Discussion

Our case study of community partnering adds to the understanding of what scholars consider “authentic” engagement (Collins, 2011) by demonstrating that collaboration between a major university, an HBCU, and an elementary school, though unconventional, is also authentic. Furthermore, unconventional engagement as described here reflects the transformative engagement process based not only on transfer of expertise from the university to community, but an interactive process in which all partners apply critical thinking skills to complex community problems (Brown et al., 2006). This particular unconventional engagement case study, meets head-on Boyer’s (1996) challenge to higher education to become more actively engaged with the nation’s schools, with community partners—some in only the third grade—engaging in multiple forms of engaged learning.

In less than two years, a local elementary school teacher’s invitation for a state university to join a partnership placed her students on the international stage, fulfilling the potential outlined by Jay’s (2010) suggestion that community research projects can be “glocal,” a condition wherein forces, ideas, and trends global in origin are played out locally. This prospect is but one of many growing out of the *The Oakdale Eagle* project. If nothing else, it raised the students’ future horizons, challenging them not to be limited by their immediate surroundings within a 96% African-American student population with 90 percent of students on free or reduced student lunch in a school that had not achieved its Adequate Yearly Progress goal in standardized tests. Despite their educational environment, this project proved to them they could compete on the larger stage. As for the University, the benefits included a positive press about its Oakdale partnership, useful field experience for students and faculty, and the realization that positive outcomes can sometimes occur serendipitously. *The Oakdale Eagle* case study presented an opportunity to articulate a model of unconventional engagement whereby the

community-campus partnership was notable for being primarily a community initiative. At the same time, the importance of funds and expertise from the university cannot be overlooked. While no formal assessment of the effects of the partnership on the students (elementary or college) has been conducted, the major goal, publication of the student newsletter, continued into its third year. The involvement of third graders as active presenters at a national conference is arguably one of the major outcomes of the project, perhaps the best example of how those of us in the academy can be authentic in our engagement efforts, even one as “unconventional” as this. The ultimate impact of this account of engagement will be if other academic institutions will open themselves up to such targets of opportunity.

Lessons Learned

This unconventional engagement case study challenges all engagement scholar players not only to think outside the box, but also to prepare themselves for the unthinkable: Elementary school students making a presentation at an international conference of scholars! Thus those who are forming partnerships in unconventional engagement are encouraged to leave all options on the table; engagement opportunities are not limited to the usual suspects. Institutions of higher learning should remain open and inviting to partnerships originating in the community, even if at first there may seem to be little benefit to the university. *The Oakdale Eagle* experience proves that unconventional engagement can be worth pursuing.

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