Scholarship Reconsidered for the Post-Truth Era

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The Post-Truth Era

Can university scholarship be reframed in a way that adequately addresses the so-called "post-truth era"?

The 2016 presidential election and its aftermath have provided a continuing series of shocks to higher education. Perhaps the most devastating aspect of recent events is the direct assault on objective truth—not subjective truth, but objective truth.

The Postmodern academy is accustomed to debates based on subjective truths, including the inherent clashes between the politically conservative and the politically progressive worldviews, or the idea that one person's freedom fighter might be another person's traitor. But that level of debate is not the issue; rather, the issue is a continuing series of bald-faced lies with no connection to physical reality. It is as if a man is holding up an apple and proclaiming to the world, "My hand is clearly empty." If a person is unwilling to accept objective truth, what is the point of discourse?

Given the potential of "alternative facts" and "fake news" to disrupt the foundations of teaching and learning, institutions of higher education should consider a more fundamental reaction to this threat than merely hoping that freshman English teachers can somehow add truth-seeking to their already impossibly long list of course content. One potential solution, recognizing a "scholarship of reporting," might seem radical at first, but this proposal has roots in the education establishment, specifically the work of Ernest L. Boyer.

Boyer's Proposed Expansion of Scholarship

Dr. Boyer had a long and distinguished academic career, serving as chancellor of the SUNY system, the head of the United States Commission on Education during the Carter Administration, and, ultimately, as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He published numerous works on teaching and learning, including the seminal 1990 text *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, in which he proposed an expansion of the concept of scholarship beyond traditional research.

In *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Boyer sought to broaden the range of acceptable scholarship. In addition to traditional research, which he labeled the scholarship of discovery, Boyer proposed three new categories of scholarship: the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching.

The scholarship of integration recognizes scholars who "give meaning to isolated facts, putting them in perspective." Boyer's designation of the scholarship of integration was a recognition that ever more specialized disciplines were not well-equipped to address the wickedly challenging problems of society, which tend to cross disciplinary boundaries. A potential example of the scholarship of integration could be an architecture professor working with a medical researcher to develop a recovery suite that improves patient outcomes.

The scholarship of application asks, in Boyer's words, "How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?" While the scholarship of application may have a service or service-learning component, Boyer argued that such projects, to be considered scholarship, must have "the rigor—and the accountability—traditionally associated with research activities." (Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff, in their 1997 follow up to *Scholarship Reconsidered* titled *Scholarship Assessed*, confronted the issue of rigor by providing a set of requirements for all forms of valid scholarship.) An example of the scholarship of application could be a product-design professor analyzing new ways to prototype devices.

The scholarship of teaching, which has since evolved into the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), has been the most influential of Boyer's three new categories of scholarship. Concerning the scholarship of teaching, Boyer said that "the work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others." Thus, Boyer proposed rewarding teachers who disseminate strategies that promote effective teaching and demonstrable learning. For example, a math teacher who designs, documents, and publishes a successful plan for flipping the classroom is performing Boyer's scholarship of teaching.

Although *Scholarship Reconsidered* was one of the most referenced scholarly works in the decade after its publication, its impact was limited. Other than the scholarship of teaching (i.e. SoTL), Boyer's proposals were rarely adopted in university-level tenure and promotion policies.

Why the resistance? Who would fight an idea designed, in Boyer's words, "to define the work of faculty in ways that enrich, rather than restrict, the quality of campus life"?

Subsequent scholars, including Timothy J.L. Chandler and Walter E. Davis, point to campus politics and to the established interests who benefit from a traditional and restrictive concept of scholarship. Established interests include many in the STEM fields, whose scholarship typically exemplifies traditional research. Furthermore, much traditional research, which design educator Donald Schön frames as "technical rationality," dovetails nicely with the corporate university's infatuation with efficiency.

In 1990, Dr. Boyer was trying to break the hegemony that traditional research held over university scholarship. Now, 27 years later, Boyer's call is even more urgent, requiring a further expansion of what is considered appropriate scholarship.

A Scholarship of Reporting

In a world that generates exabytes of new information every year, having "shoe-leather" reporters on the ground who can separate the truth from alternate facts and fake news is becoming increasingly essential. Information gathering, sometimes derided as "just reporting," is becoming more, not less, important. That is why the scholarship of reporting is a timely and necessary addition to Boyer's expanded concept of scholarship—a proposal this author first made in 2015, before the current media crisis unfolded.

Following the well-established code of ethics for print journalists, scholars engaging in the scholarship of reporting could help return universities to the "the vital center of the nation's work," to borrow a phrase that Boyer and Lee Mitgang used in their 1996 report on architecture. These scholar-reporters could be the eyes and ears of universities and colleges—and the public at large, complementing the work of an increasingly overburdened traditional press.

The scholarship of reporting would be discipline-specific. For example, climatologists could report on local crop yields, political scientists could interview under-represented communities, and urban planning faculty could report on local historic preservation board meetings. In each case, these professors would likely be covering topics or meetings that currently are insufficiently covered, or not covered at all.

Rather than concerning themselves with analysis or synthesis, professors engaging in the scholarship of reporting would focus on accurately gathering facts, in other words, *just reporting*. But consider for a moment how hugely valuable this work could be. Indeed, what is the value of analysis or synthesis if the underlying data are corrupt or incomplete?

Recognizing multiple forms of scholarship is not the same as recognizing, say, "alternative scholarship." This is not an anything goes proposition. Informed by the work of Boyer; the subsequent work of Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff; and the well-established principles of print journalism, the scholarship of reporting would be both clearly defined and rigourous.

From a Faculty Perspective

As is painfully obvious to anyone who has reviewed papers, attended conferences, or read academic journals, many faculty do not excel within the limits of today's narrow definition of scholarship. Much of what counts as scholarship is derivative and uninspired, and it stretches the imagination to believe that this work expands the boundaries of human knowledge. These shortcomings become progressively more apparent the further a discipline is from the hard sciences and humanities.

The question, then, is whether there is something wrong with the faculty, or something wrong with the system.

Not every faculty member is brilliant, and some are intellectually lazy. But most faculty are indeed smart and passionate about their respective fields, which suggests that maybe, just maybe, the system is flawed—as Boyer argued 27 years ago.

An expansion of the concept of scholarship, including the scholarship of reporting, would give faculty more opportunities to truly contribute to the university community.

Recognizing the Scholarship of Reporting

If a university believes that professors should have the option to perform high-quality reporting as part of their scholarship, then the work of the scholar-reporter must be validated by university-level tenure and promotion documents. As Boyer noted in the preface to *Scholarship Reconsidered*, "The key issue is…what activities of the professoriate are most highly prized?"

Recognizing the value of the scholarship of reporting would be a large step toward reclaiming higher education's role in propagating objective truth.

Resources

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