

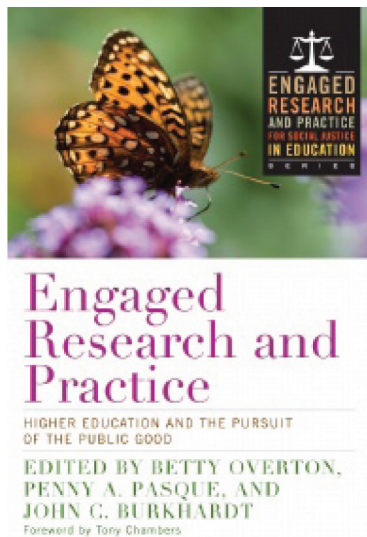


Book review

Engaged Research and Practice: Higher education and the pursuit of the public good, edited by Betty Overton, Penny A. Pasque and John C. Brukhardt

Stelling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2017, 321pp., ISBN: 978-1-62036-440-6

Reviewed by Charlotte Thorley*



Outlining the outcomes of work by the National Forum for the Public Good (National Forum), this compilation of examples of *engaged research* is offered to us by Overton *et al.* with the intention to 'inspire and support similar work' elsewhere. In this I commend them, as I clearly see the need for practice sharing in this field, and the need for an easy primer for those wishing to embark upon their own engaged research journey. Issues of context, language and research culture stop this book from being the accessible, practical guide to engaged research I expected, but for those already beginning to tackle concepts of engaged research and scholarship there is much to gain from taking a look.

Context matters

This book describes work carried out across the United States of America, funded by the National Forum, and in institutions that have a clear third-mission approach to their core purposes, namely research, teaching and the public good. They are multidiscipline institutions, and already have experience in tying student programmes to their third-mission work, as well as extensive programmes of community engagement. While higher education (HE) shares much in common globally, there are also many differences. I have no doubt that readers in the US might find the book easier to relate to, but for foreign readers it would have been useful for each chapter to make clear the academic context of the project described, as well as the community context, and for the book to introduce the US HE environment as well as that of engaged research.

Language matters

Engaged research becomes engaged scholarship, which in turn is broken down into the scholarship of engagement, scholarship in or about engagement, and scholarship for engagement. The writers throughout the volume are careful to make clear the framework of *engaged research* they are working within, and the editors make a good attempt to explore the issues of language in this area, noting their own expectations for terms. But the individual chapters fall rapidly into the languages of their own research areas, and despite priding myself on my own literacy in this area, I quickly felt out of my depth in some chapters and would need to embark on wider reading and repeat reading of these before I felt I was getting the most from them. Needing to do this for one or two chapters is a challenge I would embrace; for readers finding the whole book to be slightly alien to them I suspect the challenge would become a barrier.

Research culture matters

The projects described in the book are heavily social sciences based, and as such the researchers are working within a culture that not only values public voices within their research, but has experience of inclusion. Those that are working in the sciences are working in areas well used to community engagement, such as environmental science. Some of the universities involved have programmes of research activity for their undergraduate students; when linked with their existing student–community engagement programmes there is again an obvious route for institutional acceptance of engaged research as it is ‘central to faculty work’ (26). So, as well as the language issues already raised, there is also a transferability issue; it is not clear how to apply the lessons learnt by the researchers to other research environments, and combined with the context issues, this would make me hesitate when considering recommending the book to others if they were not already practising engaged research or active in the disciplines covered in the book. But for those I did recommend it to, it would be a rich resource, giving detailed accounts of creating effective engagement.

A chance to reflect

The standout element of the book for me is the personal reflections of some of the participating researchers. Created through a National Forum scholarship programme, these researchers are from diverse backgrounds, each with very specific and personal reasons for wanting to be more engaged in their research approaches. They do not all find this personal reflection easy, and that is exactly what is needed for such pieces; for other researchers, unsure of how they might go about becoming engaged researchers, these stories are an excellent complement to the research chapters, setting the achievements of the research programmes within a context that is relatable to, providing motivation in the way they are written.

The voice of the public

The missing element throughout is the voice of the public. In the conclusions, the authors iterate their intention not to speak for the publics they engaged, but on behalf of the academic community. The recommendations they make for moving the agenda forward are the sorts of recommendations that will be familiar to many working in this field, acknowledging the importance of culture change within academia, and the need for ‘sustainable campus structures that allow for long-term relational investments’

(284). But I would expect those long-term investments to need significant input from the publics they work with if they are to truly represent a sustainable culture change, and I would have liked to have heard the perspectives of the public within this text, both summarizing the research and as reflective statements. Targeting their publics as an audience for this book, as well as other academics, might have helped with some of the issues of context and language that I have described.

So, this text turned out not to be the introduction to engaged research I had been hoping for, but would instead be more useful as a companion to those developing their engagement approaches; something to dip in and out of when in search of motivation or as a reminder that you are not alone in trying to improve your research practice, and the world, through engagement. Knowing now the contexts in which the work is set, I look forward to picking it up again in months to come, for the inspiration and support it does indeed offer.

Notes on the contributor

Charlotte Thorley is a freelance public engagement specialist and researcher currently based in Brussels, Belgium, and formerly in the UK. From 2012–16 she established the nationally recognized Centre for Public Engagement at Queen Mary University of London while undertaking her doctoral research exploring the role of the scientist in engagement activities. She is Honorary Senior Research Associate at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London.