

Amy E. Lesen. Scientists, experts, and civic engagement: walking a fine line

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Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement: Walking a Fine Line is a timely introduction to a scholarly approach to civic engagement that, even as the demands of sustainability necessitate its application, remains controversial, i.e. place-based action-research. The chapters in this edited volume collectively exemplify this approach, as each author shares their intentions, as well as the processes and outcomes, of their work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. However, this book transcends from a collection of case studies (although the case studies are compelling) into the realm of the scholarship of place-based action-research, i.e. they contribute to the growth of knowledge about theory, practice, and pedagogy.¹

The four chapters in Part One include insights for newcomers to this type of civic engagement analogous to an introduction to laboratory protocols from seasoned bench chemists. This includes grounding in theory, critique of convention, as well as advice about avoiding, and cleaning up after, common missteps. What makes these insights particularly useful is that they are contextualized in personal experience in specific places under specific circumstances, i.e. New Orleans, post-Katrina.

In addition to an illuminating glimpse into the spectrum of issues addressed by the profession of geography that may surprise outsiders, Richard Campanella's insights about engaging the public through popular media will be particularly useful for any expert wading into the vicissitudes of the public realm, as much for their cautions as for recommendations (Part One, Chapter One). Amy

¹ In addition to the "scholarship of civic engagement," sobriquets for this emerging field of scholarship include the "Science of Transdisciplinary Action-Research" (Stokols 2006) and the "Scholarship of Transdisciplinary Action-Research" (Thering and Chance 2011).

Koritz reflects on her transition from traditional pedagogy to a pedagogy informed by service-learning to analyze and critique the status of civic engagement and the institutional barriers to multi-disciplinary place-based research in higher education (Part One, Chapter Two). Margaret Moly Olsen recounts the poignant, sometimes harsh, realities faced by both faculty and students who “destabilize” education by “democratizing” traditional academic hierarchies and posits the necessity for such destabilization for the education of a citizenry who not only understands science, but who is able to effectively apply science (Part One, Chapter Three). Steven Tremaine describes the disconcerting experience, analogous to alternating perceptions of figure/ground optical illusions, of launching a place-centric satellite campus in post-Katrina New Orleans from a campus-centric platform in an elite Upstate New York college (Part One, Chapter Four). All four authors share insights that, while contextualized in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, will be applicable to place-based civic engagement in a diversity of settings.

Part Two includes both generalizable theory and guidelines for practice based on each authors’ experience, literature review, analysis of similar case studies, and original research. As such this collection exemplifies the scholarship of transdisciplinary action-research. While this reviewer initially cringed at the idea of a “checklist” for a place-based action-research approach to civic engagement, Janice Cumberbatch’s contribution may be the most valuable field manual available to newcomers and seasoned professionals alike. It most certainly will give pause to the intrepid and well-meaning, but uninitiated, and help them avoid the “rookie” mistakes that damage credibility, trust, and reputations. This reviewer originally had similar concerns about the checklists for L.E.E.D. certification, and the more recent S.E.E.D. certification for built works, i.e. the risk that checking the boxes becomes the objective (L.E.E.D. is Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design; S.E.E.D. is Social, Environmental, and Economic Design. Both are evaluation protocols used to certify built works). However, Cumberbatch’s explanatory text, including details about the methodology undertaken to develop the checklist, eases those concerns considerably. I anticipate that future iterations of evaluation metrics like the S.E.E.D. certification will cite this contribution (Part Two, Chapter One).

Christina Peterson’s contribution is an example of grounded theory in action, as her experience in the field informs her research and her analysis of civic engagement to “identify overarching themes and common elements” (Thering and Chance 2011). The “tell” of grounded theory is in her

attention to the perspective of residents, which she recounts with a masterful balance between the rigor of a researcher and human empathy. She identifies elements of civic engagement that contribute to trust building, effective communication among diverse participants, and meaningful knowledge exchange to draft a model community-based equivalent of the “IRB” (Internal Review Board) research ethics review required by most institutions (Part Two, Chapter Two).

Peterson “walks the talk” of the ethics embedded in her model IRB in the second of her two contributions to this compendium, co-authored with the book’s editor, Amy Lesen, and an elected official from one of the indigenous communities traumatized by hurricane Katrina, Chief Albert P. Naquin of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians. This chapter is primarily an edited transcript of Peterson and Lesen’s interview/conversation with Chief Naquin regarding his experience and the experience of his community in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Chief Naquin collaborated with Lesen and Peterson on the editing of the transcript for this chapter. Readers should note that Chief Naquin is listed as lead author, which follows the ethic of the Community-based IRB, as his is the primary intellectual contribution. Having worked extensively in First Nations communities, this reviewer experienced sympathy pangs, and pangs of guilt, as I read Chief Naquin’s ambivalence about the “we’re from the university (newspaper, nonprofit, etc.) and we’re here to help you” conundrum local officials in “distressed” communities face on a regular basis (Part Two, Chapter Three).

Somewhat ironically, the uncomfortable ambivalence evident in Chief Naquin’s responses are even more pronounced in Amy Lesen’s analysis of scientists’ responses to civic engagement in general and the use of social media as a means of civic engagement in particular. Her analysis suggests that the “Web 2.0” is creating a seismic shift in science communication that has the capacity to democratize science and humanize scientists in ways that are emancipatory to some and deeply threatening to others. Concerns about intellectual property and public image clash with a genuine desire to make a difference in the “real world.” Lesen’s example of a hashtag that reveals the serendipitous aspects of scientific discovery, which “went viral” in 2013 (#OverlyHonestMethods), is now repeated by the biophysical scientists she focuses on in this article and social scientists alike. The original Tweet was “incubation lasted three days because this is how long the undergrad forgot the experiment in the fridge #overlyhonestmethods.” This reviewer uses humanizing examples like this during professional development seminars for community-based researchers

who often hesitate to include unanticipated results in reports, e.g. “If a scientist in a lab can accidentally spill something and publish the results, you can report an outcome you didn’t foresee; it is all in the way you write it up.”

Richard Campanella’s description of civic engagement i.e. “when individual scholars, scientists, and experts emerge hesitantly from their archives and laboratories to *personally* [italics in original] answer calls from fellow citizens at a time of crisis” is “book-ended” by the experience of one of the scientists Lesen interviewed: “Yeah, I tried that; they kicked me out of the academy.” That conundrum summarizes the “Fine Line” of *Scientists, Experts, and Civic Engagement: Walking a Fine Line*. I recommend this book for use as a reference for scientists and experts already working in the public realm, and for a textbook for scientists of all disciplines as an introduction to civic engagement. This reviewer hopes readers will not be discouraged by this deep dive into the vicissitudes of civic engagement, but rather be encouraged to engage in a manner that attends to these thoughtful and authentic reflections.

References

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