Becoming Useful:
Using Engaged Scholarship as a Means to Move NPO Scholarship Forward

NPO Pre-Conference Essay
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Studies of nonprofit organizations in the Communication discipline are interesting. They tend to be descriptive and explore the unique characteristics, processes, practices, and perspectives of single nonprofits. In other cases they serve as convenient locations to study organizational dynamics such as framing, superior-subordinate communication, change, decision-making, leadership, adoption of communication technologies etc. Thus, we sometimes ask “how are NPOs unique or different from other types of organizations” and we sometimes just ask about our phenomenon of central interest and pay less attention to the nonprofitness of the organization where data are collected. In either case, I find myself asking, where is all of this going?

It seems that there is a desire among those of us who call ourselves Nonprofit Scholars in this discipline to find a “there” there. We want there to be some sort of body of work; theoretical meat; or at least empirical foci that collect for impact of some kind. I’m not sure we are collectively certain of the contribution we want this work in nonprofits to make, but I’ve talked to enough people who continue to feel that it is important that we build something together to believe this is an implied widely shared goal. It seems also that a part of this shared goal stems from the desire of many of us to establish a sort of legitimacy to the sub-sub-area of NPO
communication scholarship. So, the next question becomes, what should we build and with what goal or goals in mind?

One obvious goal that I’ve heard suggested is to “prove” that nonprofits are unique and thus justify our study of them. I have to say I’m not very excited by that proposal. Often my students jump to this as the clear goal or central question of organizational scholars who study nonprofits. We’ve probably all been in those conversations where the “unique” characteristic X is argued to be just as prevalent in governmental or for-profit organizations --thus, eliminating it as the distinguisher of what makes NPOs unique. Volunteers are in governmental organizations too. For-profits have boards too. Governmental organizations have diverse stakeholders too. You get the idea. In fact, Frumkin (2002) has noted that NPOs have some things in common with governmental organizations and other things in common with for-profits. That their “otherness” is relative to what they are compared against. He also concludes that it might be time to retire the nonprofit terminology given the wide diversity of types of organizations in the landscape referred to variously as the “independent sector,” “voluntary sector,” “nongovernmental sector,” “civil society,” and “third sector” among other terms. The comparison of a large metropolitan hospital in the same conceptual pile as a grass-roots advocacy group, a professional association, or an international charity seems odd at best. Clearly, as Frumkin shows through his history of the terms, there are a lot of politics involved in the naming of the sector—and this domain of scholarship. This discussion also demonstrates why the “uniqueness” goal might be problematic. We’ll burn a lot of energy trying to make this case—and for what?
Another possible goal of our collective work in study of communication in/of/around NPOs might be to generate new theory or challenge existing theory in organizational communication. Since our “canon” of organizational communication knowledge has largely been built on western for-profit organizations, there is certainly room to add to the dimensions and foci of current knowledge. If you pick up an organizational textbook or examine the lessons plans for many of us who teach introductory courses in organizational communication, you will probably find much of what is claimed as general tendencies, fundamental types, or categories of practice, policy, process, dynamics etc. pertains more so to moderately sized to large for-profits than to other sorts of organizations or organizing. For example, you wouldn’t expect to see much if any attention given to management of unpaid staff; the identification of episodic volunteers; the participatory practices of engaging diverse stakeholders in a community served by the organization; the assessment of intractable missions (e.g., inspire appreciation for art; create better citizens) among many others. This goal is not one bent on proving that NPOs are unique, but rather setting aside that question and instead focusing on the simple fact that NPOs might be a better (or best) place to study many dynamics that organizational communications scholars are/should be interested in studying. Also, that such study might lead us to question some of what we have concluded based on studies dominantly conducted in for-profit settings. This is a path that I advocated in my 2005 article in MCQ (Lewis, 2005). I think it still has appeal and might be a useful direction for us to get busy doing.
A third option is one I’d like to spend the remainder of this essay advocating. While we’ve succeeded in being interesting in our NPO scholarship, I think we have been less useful. That is, we aren’t necessarily tackling problems, puzzles, and possibilities that those in practice would find to be relevant and important. One way forward as a group of scholars who share interests in NPOs is to spend less time trying to convince our organizational colleagues that our interests are important and/or legitimate and spend more time trying to answer questions of importance to practitioners in NPOs. This approach is appealing on a number of levels. First, it has the potential to move us off of a path that might develop into a random set of descriptive studies of the unusual or the atypical (which I think is too often our default foci). Second, if we found some commonalities among NPO practitioners in what is most urgently needed; most significantly challenging; what is on the near horizon for opportunities, we might find ourselves coalescing around topics that do and will matter. Third, it strikes me as an opportunity to lead our sub-area in demonstrating the value and illustrating good models for engaged scholarship.

**Engaged Scholarship as a Means to be Useful**

Engaged scholarship has been discussed in our sub-discipline and in management and other areas of study for several years (cf. Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Lawler, Mohrman, Mohrman, Ledford, & Cummings, 1985; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Van de Ven, 2007). As Barge and Shockley-Zalabak (2008) argue:

Academic scholars have traditionally been concerned with the construction of scientific knowledge, which tends to be decontextualized and based on technical rationality, while
practitioners are more concerned with practical knowledge that focuses on making moral choices about how to act in contingent situations. (p. 251)

Andrew Van de Ven (2007) argues we have traditionally tried to bridge the gap between these different foci of academic scholars and practitioners by encouraging knowledge transfer: finding ways to give “back” our expert knowledge to practitioners. What Van de Ven and others have argued though is that this is not only a very limited (and paternalistic) approach; it misses the point that our real challenge lies with a knowledge production problem. That is, we are creating knowledge without partnering with practitioners and the result is knowledge that isn’t very useful. Van de Ven (2007) argues that,

Engagement is a relationship that involves negotiation and collaboration between researchers and practitioners in a learning community; such a community jointly produces knowledge that can both advance the scientific enterprise and enlighten a community of practitioners (p. 7).

Fundamentally, our knowledge is better if we partner in diverse learning communities rather than simply aloofly draw our own conclusions and then generously share them with the less fortunate (e.g., those who are the object of our study and knowledge).

While this approach to scholarship has some surface level appeal, not everyone is convinced it is possible or desirable. In fact debate continues to raise issues of the practical (can a scholar actually be tenured and promoted doing this sort of work?) to the philosophical (e.g., can these really become one knowledge
production process or are these two distinct forms of knowledge that cannot be usefully connected?). McKelvey (2006) questions the plausibility of the ideal of engaged scholarship suggested by Van de Ven and Johnson (2006). He argues that biases of for profit organizations; the mismatch of “success goals” for scholars and practitioners; and the time-table differences between problem-solution cycles of businesses and academics are insolvable problems in doing engaged scholarship. Certainly there are major issues to be dealt with in doing engaged scholarship including those that McKelvey has raised as well as issues concerning the ways such scholarship is assessed in tenure and promotion cases of faculty at research universities. However, I doubt they are insolvable.

As I see it, engaged scholarship does provide a mechanism for NPO communication scholars to move forward together in a manner that might build to a desirable set of outcomes. The basic tenets of engaged scholarship involves principles that will work well with NPO research (and perhaps avoid some of the issues that McKelvey raises). For example, Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) suggest that engaged scholarship tackle “big questions.” It seems to me that many NPOs are already grappling with “big questions” such as solving intractable societal problems; galvanizing diverse groups of stakeholders around complex community, national, and global issues; generating and executing effective governance without benefit of classic control mechanisms of bureaucratic authority more typical of for-profit organizations; and defining and assessing goals and mission within the context of contested, consequential, and moral grounds (e.g., HIV, terrorism, racial equality).
Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) also recommend that we work collaboratively within a learning community. It seems that NPOs would be more amenable to collaboration than many for-profit, or even governmental organizational settings. NPOs often collaborate first. Certainly, there are contexts in which NPOs also compete, but their skill sets and normal way of operating tends to include collaboration. They are less prone to “secrets” and proprietary concerns than many for-profits or governmental agencies. Thus, it seems likely that partnering with a variety of NPOs for the sake of increasing knowledge production on problems of practice and problems of explanation (e.g., theory) would be easier than McKelvey suggests it is in business contexts. It may even be that our participation in convening collaborative learning communities among NPOs that share common practice challenges but who rarely cross paths might be quite useful and welcome.

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) also argue for establishing lengthy relationships with those in the field we wish to know. After spending four years working with a community of homeless service providers, I can attest to the great value of getting to know people, places, and having the benefit of being witness to the history of an organization or organizing activities. Although some for-profit sponsors of our research might be happier the faster we moved through their organization and delivered our “goods” (e.g., a report, set of recommendations, data), nonprofit organizational sponsors in my experience tend to be very suspicious of the drop-in research projects. Dropping in for a week or a few weeks to hand out surveys, do some interviews, and observe a few meetings usually yields few insights that these practitioners value. Even if researchers have captured something interesting, the
practitioner has reasonable doubt about what you could have possibly learned in such a short exposure. They therefore give little credence to whatever practical recommendations or observations are provided as an outcome of such research. Part of building trust is being there for a while. Thus, many NPO practitioners may prefer a slow-forming relationship that spans months or even years.

**How to Begin Engaged Scholarship to Push the NPO Agenda**

The more I think about the idea of using an engaged scholarship approach to help chart the course of NPO communication scholarship, the more I see real potential. In particular I'd recommend three starting points for taking the engaged approach to creating a substantial body of NPO communication scholarship: (1) convene, (2) identify best practices, and (3) conduct a future search strategy.

University faculty can play a useful role in convening NPO practitioners who would make up a useful learning community. A powerful way to convene NPO practitioners would be to gather those who don't yet know one another but who share something in common in terms of puzzles, problems, or possibilities (e.g., NPOs who serve stigmatized populations; NPOs that are moving into social media but have little technical expertise; NPOs that are staffed increasingly by episodic volunteers). For example, if a group of NPO practitioners who were experimenting with social media were brought together, irrespective of the sort of NPO they represented, and shared ideas, resources, lessons learned etc. the learning community would serve a purpose for both the scholar who wanted to learn about social media in NPOs and for the practitioners who want to learn from one another as well as from the scholars involved. Similar sorts of learning communities might surround topics that span the
practice-focus as well as scholarly interests such as: governance models; volunteer management challenges and opportunities (e.g., developing partnerships with corporations); challenges with crafting successful campaigns to raise issue awareness among many others.

A second step that we could take within these learning communities or beyond them would be to identify NPOs that are highly successful in some regard and document their best practices. This alone would be useful for the NPO leaders who seek models for best practice given their lack of resources for and access to consultants. Scholars can help to survey the larger world of best practice models by teaming up with each other; bridging to other communities; and drawing on knowledge, experience, and networks of scholars in other disciplines.

Once best practices in any given domain are identified from such methods, the scholar can enter into partnership with NPO practitioners to discover why best practices work. This becomes fodder both for mapping out important contingencies for the practitioners (so that poor-fitting practices aren't transported inappropriately) and developing theoretical explanation of a phenomenon of interest to the scholarly community.

One reason I especially like this approach is it is non-threatening to NPOs. We are not going in with the intention of studying, exposing, and documenting dysfunction or failure. While that might be interesting (e.g., show how volunteers are routinely ignored; boards and CEOs have poor decision-making; engagement of community stakeholders is lacking) it doesn't help anyone or anything get better.
Focusing on best practice models and elaborating why they work and how they might be equally or better in other contexts is useful.

Third, an important role that scholar-practitioner learning communities can play is to stimulate thinking and research about the future of NPOs in important ways. In the conversation between what scholars in Communication know about trends in organizing, communication media, and theoretical developments that help account for a variety of topics related to social interaction and what practitioners see as trends in service delivery, patterns of organizing, dominance of governance models, problems they are facing etc. we can make some very informed choices about the future of NPOs.

Scholars bring to the table both theory and methodological tools as well as interested graduate students. NPOs bring insight and a strong motivation to see into the future of their own fields and the state of the “civil society” in general. As a learning community joins together to imagine the future and see the “writing on the wall” for a particular niche (e.g., services to the poor; membership associations based on race or ethnicity; religious organizations; international relief organizations) the potential for useful agenda setting is high. Drawing from the energy and different knowledge bases in a learning community that mixes NPO practitioners who share some commonality but who likely don’t know one another (because they don’t serve the same population in the same ways) with scholars who have a keen interest in a social and/or communication problem or challenge is quite compelling.

Finally, I think we need to consider some cautionary notes about doing this sort of engaged work with NPO practitioners. There are some good lessons to be
learned from the experience of our Health Communication colleagues who have
started to embrace the model of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR).
In CBPR members of communities participate directly in the doing of research (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 2001). This model has been applied to help address public health issues such as safe drinking water; education about substance abuse; and other health issues of interest to communities. “CBPR seeks to benefit disenfranchised communities and their health through a redistribution of power and transformation of social structures” (Bidwell, 2009). In this tradition, community members are involved not only as subjects or data-assistants (helping to access subjects) they are involved in the decision-making process of research design, data analysis and interpretation, and the evaluation of the action outcomes of research. The documented benefits of CBPR in its various forms suggest that in some cases this approach has resulted higher validity to research as well as training community members in research techniques. Through participation in research and playing important roles in decision-making, agenda setting, interpretation of data and so on community members (or practitioners for the purpose of this essay) can be empowered by some degree of control over knowledge production (Stoecker, 2009).

There are some caveats noted by those who track CBPR and other similar models. For example, it is easy to drift into “tokenism” (Stoecker, 2009, p.393) wherein practitioner’s presence becomes merely symbolic rather than resource. They can be treated as naïve witness to the research as opposed to active empowered partner. We must learn to listen to and respect practitioners’ voices in our research (Bastia, Tseng, McKeever, & Jack, 2010). We also will need to learn to
share resources (data, budget, personnel) – a particularly daunting challenge when grant dollars are involved.

Despite the challenges of engaged scholarship and the pain we may feel upon really sharing control over our research projects and research agenda with those outside of the academic world, I see great potential here. This approach can enliven us, help guide us to important issues and topics, and, best of all, lead us to being useful. If we accomplish nothing else, that would be a pretty great outcome.
References


