The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820: I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.
in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education.

The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Higher Education Exchange, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation.
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WICKED BEDFELLOWS: CAN SCIENCE AND DEMOCRACY COEXIST IN THE LAND GRANT?

By Wynne Wright

Five years ago, Michigan State University (MSU) began to explore whether deliberative dialogue could breathe life into the democratic mission of the land grant by renewing a place for citizens in their university. In part, we took on the task of assessing whether scientists and citizens could engage in deliberative dialogue to solve local problems and, in this way, serve the public good. In this essay, I discuss our experience and reflect on our institutional readiness as a land grant university to adapt to the new changing environment and to live up to our unique mission. By examining the role of faculty members to engage in meaningful public deliberation with citizens, I conclude that deeply rooted epistemological commitments present formidable hurdles to meaningful change.

Old Models, New Problems

Nowhere is this challenge more fully felt than in the case of the Extension Service, which is being called upon to broaden its epistemological repertoire, thereby loosening its tie to the traditional expert model of education delivery. The knowledge transfer model, which has typified much of Extension work over the years, was closely modeled after the research on the adoption of innovations. Adoption and diffusion research was generally concerned with the question of how new knowledge, created in the land grant system, could be transferred to catalyze behavioral change in society. Early enthusiasts were giddy for this framework, prompting a paradigm change in the fields of rural sociology, agricultural education, and communications. Outreach dissemination models became de rigueur in disciplines like animal science, soil science, and engineering. Yet research gradually began to show that the adoption/diffusion model took an advocacy approach toward technological change and failed to adequately interrogate the risks associated with adoption for the individuals involved, the natural environment, and for society.
at large. Unfortunately, this seems to be the best kept secret in my university. Such scholarship and outreach models continue to proliferate, if not considered the coin of the realm. We at MSU are not unique, however. For example, the *Journal of Extension*—the premier journal read by Extension educators—abounds with scholarship founded on the unproblematized principles of adoption/diffusion (Stephenson, 2003).

The critiques of this model, and the social problems created from its application, are tired refrains. More recently, scholars have turned a critical eye to the power imbalances created between scientific experts, who are perceived to be the creators of knowledge, and citizens, who occupy the role of passive consumers of information with little to offer in the area of knowledge construction. This approach reproduces an enabling or deficiency view of citizens—of individuals having little to contribute to the management of their own problems and in need of a hero to save them. The result has been allegations of violations of the public’s trust, and social and intellectual distance, all of which serve to further stratify society and alienate individuals from institutions that are designed to serve the public good.

Our problems are less technical than social today, however. Yields have been maximized, seeds have been vastly improved, modern technologies that make life easier are accessible, and conservation programs are in place. Today’s challenges are more likely to arise from competing visions of how to organize natural resources, technology, labor, and capital to uplift humanity. We live in an era where questions of moral reflection, such as “ought we do this,” trump more narrow technical challenges. Now that we have solved many of the more immediate technical problems to modernize our society, how are we to refashion the land grant function? Like beating a square peg into a round hole, we persist in turning social problems into technical fixes, perhaps because our unwavering defense of science is the primary tool in our epistemological tool kit. Under the cloak of “scientific objectivity,” land grant research and Extension programming continue to embrace the power of
science to solve what are essentially social problems, either unaware of, or politically insensitive to, the socially-situated nature of knowledge construction or the problems and risks that emerge from innovation.

The “Wicked” World of the Land Grant

Land grant scientists are not so naïve as to believe that the problems with which we are faced are narrow, technical problems, easily solved with our disciplinary tools. On the contrary, the common buzzword in the corridors of my college is “wicked” problems—a label used to denote the complexity of contemporary agrifood and natural resource problems. Wicked problems are dynamically complex, ill-structured, public problems that defy the objective and linear assumptions of positivist science. They are problems that are open to interpretation, and contest, frequently making them vexing and intractable, and obscuring any clear and definitive way forward, and, thus, highly resistant to resolution (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Because of such complexity and interdependency, knowledge is always tentative and partial, owing to the sociocultural values at work, as well as the special interests and tactics of actors actively engaged in the manipulation of the problem. Wicked problems cannot be approached in terms of narrowly defined technical definitions and solutions—the purview of experts operating within the narrow analytical approaches of disciplinary paradigms. In the best-case scenario, they are managed, not solved.

On New Year’s Eve in 1999, four individuals claiming affiliation with the Earth Liberation Front firebombed the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project housed in Agricultural Hall on the MSU campus. The arson attack can be read as just another irrational act of disenfranchised youth rejecting genetically modified organisms, or even modernity itself, but that would be a good example of partial knowledge. Biotechnology research, as well as resistance, is a wicked problem, the kind that is increasingly coming to dominate applied techno-science work in the land grant. Indeed, for virtually every question being asked by researchers inside the land grant university, others are stepping up to challenge its sociocultural, political, economic, and ethical rationality.
You don’t have to experience a firebomb, however, to know that wicked problems are changing the landscape of the land grant. Wicked problems are forcing land grant universities to reconsider and account for multiple ways of knowing—ways that do not fit preconceived logic models. We are also being asked to move beyond a one-way transfer of information and technology, to open up ourselves to learning from and with others, to hear their concerns, incorporate their values, and to shed our strict, unwavering commitment to positivist science in favor of democratic participatory knowledge construction. This logic would seem to encourage, if not compel, me and my colleagues to engage with community members in context-specific problem solving that valorizes citizen knowledge.

With all of this as background, our work at MSU was designed as an intentional effort to infuse participatory dialogue and deliberation into efforts being undertaken by grassroots groups and organizations, public policymakers, decision makers, and civic professionals. Our focus was on wicked problems experienced in agriculture and natural resources. The MSU experience has revealed to us that public engagement through deliberative dialogue can invigorate civic life, but it also brings to light epistemological tensions that can fragment actors. Science is a double-edged sword: just as it can contribute to helping people live better lives, it can also obstruct efforts to improve the human condition, especially if one considers the advancement of democratic engagement as an integral part of social improvement. Many of the cases pursued at MSU in the course of deliberative dialogue work ran into what might be termed “scientific obstruction.” We learned that science can be both enabling and politically quieting or exclusionary. In the following section, I will describe some of the effects we encountered when land grant science collided with deliberative dialogue.

**Science Meets Dialogue**

Are we ready to meet citizens on equal footing and engage with them to solve our wicked problems? How receptive are we to citizen-scientist experiments in deliberative dialogue? Faculty involvement in our work typically came by way of project consultation as subject experts. In each case, faculty members’ repertoire
for engagement appeared to exalt scientific rationality, with most showing relatively little to no interest in constructing new rules for engagement. While lip service may have been paid to the need to “bring stakeholders in,” at each turn, science was exercised to construct scientists as the arbitrator of authority and to use science as the benchmark for acceptable rules of engagement. Three cases illustrate this conclusion.

**Case One**

We assembled a group to explore how we might incorporate opportunities for deliberative dialogue to respond to a timely economic issue facing Michigan residents. Some faculty participants labored with this approach. As one faculty member put it, “For the life of me I can’t figure out why we would ask people what’s causing the …[problem] … or what should be done about it.” When pressed to elaborate, the faculty member responded that any decision making related to this problem should reside squarely in the domain of those with specialized knowledge, with individuals who understand the complexity of this global and multi-dimensional issue—with scientists.

In these observations my colleague posits a binary divide between experts and citizens, revealing an approach that valorizes knowledge gained by scientific means and devalues or omits citizen knowledge. As this project unfolded—and it evolved with emphasis on gaining the public’s perspective on this subject—we learned that citizens’ knowledge on the topic was not only nuanced, but that it also mirrored every topic area deemed significant by the scientists. As a result, we proceeded to prepare a NIF-style issue book, written by members of the public who participated in a statewide forum. The issue book contained practical solutions to address the problem. While the citizens involved did not articulate the complexity of the problem with the same breadth as the scientists, their personal experience gave them practical

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*The specific nature of each of these cases has been obscured to protect the identity of the actors involved. In cases where I use the word “expert,” I do so not to devalue the knowledge of citizens but to differentiate citizens from those who hold professional roles as “experts.”*
background for proposing ways to reduce the challenges citizens were facing, which escaped the scientists.

This example demonstrates that wicked problems cannot be solved in isolation; citizens have unique and important contributions to make in solving wicked problems. It also shows that deliberative dialogue can be a tool to bridge the divides and help scientists learn from citizens. The experience also reinforces that more accessible and diverse sources of scientific information should be provided to citizens as a means to enhance the value of science, but that scientists, likewise, need opportunities to hear citizens process practical problems and their resolution.

Case Two

A similar dilemma was faced by another faculty member. She was invited by a deliberating group to answer technical questions associated with the group’s interest. At each turn, her responses were met with additional questions: group members pushed back, asking the expert to justify her answers, provide historical and social content, and engage with them about competing paradigms associated with a discussion of the topic at hand. At one meeting, following two hours of heated dialogue and debate, the scientist had this to say: “They sure don’t respect science.” She was perplexed at their refusal to accept her responses, and she noted the way they pushed back, often by offering competing knowledge claims—claims that they had developed from accessing sources outside of mainstream science. To this scientist, not only was her defense of science questioned, but so was her very identity. “Why don’t they trust me?” she asked, unable to distinguish herself from the scientific process. For many we have encountered in this work, questioning science is perceived as an attack on the expert’s sense of self.

To the faculty member’s credit, she pushed back too, refusing to accept the citizens’ critique of her thinking as superior; she critiqued their logic, sources, and motivations, too, and in this way, forced herself to interrogate her own logic, motivations, and received knowledge. As an outcome, the scientist was invited to join the group on a regular basis,
meeting to discuss issues of mutual interest. Such a coconstruction of knowledge—with techno-scientific knowledge operating alongside the values, interests, and competing ways of knowing that citizens bring—is critical in avoiding the partiality of knowledge that reliance on strict positivist science alone produces.

**Case Three**

A final example pertains to the prevalence of dueling tensions between science and society. In this instance, citizens were deliberating how to address a local ecological problem in their community. Experts from MSU and state agencies were invited to provide input at the citizens’ invitation. The meetings regularly became contentious, with citizens and experts sometimes butting heads on appropriate strategies for resolving the community’s dilemma. Citizens felt that some experts came to the meetings with preconceived answers to their problem—answers based in scientific expertise and professional experience—and disregarded their practical experience with the issue and desired values for their community. Some experts began to feel that their deliberations were being interpreted as successful only if citizens confirmed their techno-scientific recommendations. Several citizens responded viscerally to the circumstance and one said, “he [the scientist] would come in here every week and tell us what we ought to do in our community. He was so smug. It got to the point I could not stand to look at him, so I stopped sitting across the table from him.”

Lashing out at the perceived arrogance of experts, and their use of science to establish themselves as authorities, forces us to place this interaction in a broader social context, one in which science is valorized and citizens’ knowledge is subordinated. We might think of this citizens’ reaction as a “weapon of the weak”—one of the few, if only, means powerless people have when they are confronted with interactions that deny them dignity and voice (Scott, 1985). In this way,
it becomes clear from the response that it may be less that science itself is suspect, but that the uses of science can facilitate perceptions of powerlessness among citizens. When that happens, science can be a means to stratify citizens, perpetuate the devaluation of expertise, construct partial knowledge, and move us further from the uplift function we desire science to play in bettering humanity.

Our three cases suggest that knowledge construction for problem solving in the land grant tradition is interactive. It is not static nor is it the special purview of experts who have been granted institutional roles to perform science or engage in the one-way transmission of knowledge. In order to address the wicked problems facing the twenty-first century land grant, scientists and citizens must avoid the partiality trap of constructing solutions with a singular scientific lens, and instead collaborate to coconstruct knowledge. This new partnership is not about substituting one form of knowledge for another but a new path toward problem solving that embraces respect for individual and community knowledge, incorporating values and interests as well as drawing upon knowledge that flows from the scientific reservoir. Our experience has taught us that this begins by setting a big table and inviting everyone to engage to avoid the problem of partiality, questioning what we think we know and admitting what we do not, listening more and presuming less, and avoiding the temptation to trespass where uninvited.

Conclusion

What then, can we learn about these experiments in deliberative dialogue at MSU? It is clear that citizens can engage meaningfully in discussions about science and wicked problems, as well as about the challenges these issues bring to everyday life and the conundrum they frequently present for land grant institutions. It is less clear that faculty are prepared to enter into such dialogue. Not only did we meet opposition to incorporating citizens in decision making, we encountered resistance to their unique knowledge and perspectives. This opposition to including the public in decision making seems to stem primarily from perceptions of public ignorance—that
citizens cannot possibly understand such complex information. In the end, both forms of opposition result in the valorization of science, yielding mixed results for society.

If room is to be made for democratizing the process of discovery and problem solving, new institutional forms of governance in higher education will need to be put in place—governance that brings citizens fundamentally into the knowledge-construction process. It remains to be seen whether higher education will acknowledge the problem and, with that, put into place policies and approaches to accommodate greater engagement of the faculty with the public. A good deal has been written about current reward structures for faculty and their inability to encourage this transition. Even if such systems are established, our work suggests that there is a difference between what institutions do and what faculty members do. Although there is considerable rhetoric associated with land grant universities as “engaged institutions,” that assertion (even if valid) does not automatically translate into the conclusion that faculty members at land grant locations are engaged faculty, generally, or more engaged than faculty counterparts located at non-land grant schools. When they are engaged, they may be so in ways that perpetuate the citizen-science divide rather than bridging it. The disciplinary and professional training faculty receive is a key variable, much more influential than institutional location or type. Believing that land grant institutions represent a “special case” (that is, land-grant faculty are more engaged than before, historically, or more engaged than colleagues located elsewhere) is probably more aspirational, if not self-serving, than it is real.

Perhaps the most useful finding from the MSU work is the constant presence of tension and struggle experienced by the MSU team. Our experience reinforces the belief that it does no good to look at deliberative work romantically; it is anything but conflict-free and harmonious. Rather, as Mouffe (2000) points out, struggle is at the vortex of public work; it is rife with conflict, loaded with the clash of values, power struggles, and ideas that seed struggle, but bring change. Faculty and citizens both need more preparation for the tension and struggle these epistemological divides engender, not training in consensus building. All citizen-science collaborative engagement will need to be understood for its dynamism that comes from problem complexity and competing values and interests. While
no worthwhile change will likely take place inside or outside the academy without this awareness, the pressing question is whether contemporary land grant universities are truly up to the challenge.

REFERENCES


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