The Doing of Scholarship:
Critical Distinctions Between Active and Passive Forms

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Remarks presented at the
University of Illinois Springfield
Faculty Scholarship Recognition Luncheon
October 13, 2011
In recent weeks, I’ve been thinking about the value of scholarship, particularly within the context of the teacher-scholar model. Some of my musings have been prompted in part by the need to prepare for today’s recognition event, but also by some aspects of recent state and national conversations, in which higher education has been criticized for not doing enough to teach undergraduate students. Now, I had hoped to have a well-recognized fellow from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a keynote speaker today, but alas the scheduling gods didn’t smile on us and she couldn’t be here on this date, so you’re stuck with me. So, for the remainder of our time today, I’d like to share with you some of my observations and musings on the essence of scholarship broadly defined and its value within the teacher-scholar model. I don’t expect what I say to rise to the level of controversial, but I do hope that something in my remarks will spark thought and perhaps evoke further collegial discussions about the nature of scholarship. Simply stated, my thesis is that there is an important distinction to be made between passive and active forms of faculty scholarship, and that active scholarship is intrinsically related to excellence under the teacher-scholar model.

I’d like to start by highlighting two well-worn quotations, both critical of teachers, and both once again being dusted off and bandied about in books and speeches critical of higher education today. You’ve probably heard each of them. The first is attributable to George Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright and political satirist. In 1903 he reportedly wrote, “He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches” (The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 1979, p. 497). Of course, his basic words have been paraphrased and elaborated over the years, one of the most recent versions and my personal favorite at the moment being “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach; and those who can do neither, administer” (Calverley, n.d., cited in Fitzhenry, 1993, p. 66).

I think most of you know that I am a full professor here at UIS, but I have been in an administrative role at one level or another for the past nine years. Now, I’m fairly certain that I haven’t completely forgotten how to teach and conduct research in my field, but I can tell you that I have no time to actually do either as an administrator. So, perhaps in a very limited sense, Shaw’s adage is painfully true for me as an administrator, but certainly not for our faculty as teacher-scholars.

The second quotation comes to us, at least in part, from a commencement address by Nicholas Murray Butler, who served as President of Columbia University for 43 years in the first half of the 20th
century. It has been embellished over the years, but the gist of it is that “an expert is one who knows more and more about less and less [until eventually she or he knows nearly everything about almost nothing]” (see The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 1979, p. 117). Surprisingly, some variation of that comment is also cited not infrequently by leaders in higher education today, often in association with expressions of concern about the proliferation of academic subfields and specializations within Research I Universities. The underlying fear is that academics are increasingly operating in silos of esotericism and obscurity, and competing to publish in highly selective top-ranked journals at a time when America needs a more educated workforce, a time when the greatest potential for new discoveries are in areas requiring multi- and interdisciplinary efforts, and a time when the greatest societal needs are for practical applications of knowledge to make a real difference in the world. Such concerns are not new, but they are gaining in prominence and garnering increasing public attention.

Of course, the major factors driving criticism of higher education today involve escalating costs, a shaky national economy, high unemployment rates, and the specter of increasing competition for jobs and resources globally. In today’s economic climate, questions about the monetary value of a college education are understandably coupled with concerns that teachers may not be teaching well enough or perhaps not teaching enough of practical relevance. The rapid evolution of communication technologies is another factor, leading the digital native generations to question whether faculty in higher education are really needed at all, given the expanse of electronic information available at their fingertips through the world wide web.

In their recently published book, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*, Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring (2011) argue that most if not all American universities and colleges are suffering profoundly but largely unconsciously from Harvard-envy -- the desire to emulate a model of higher education framed by elite, private institutions long viewed as representing the pinnacle of excellence in American higher education. The competitive best-and-no-less/up-or-out/publish-or-perish tenure system figured prominently in the Harvard model, and was subsequently replicated in both Research I and some Comprehensive universities. The authors present a compelling case for this assertion, but one of their main points is that continuing the Harvard chase is no longer economically sustainable or nationally desirable. Mindlessly chasing the Harvard model cannot
generate the volume of education needed in the United States, and new and innovative models of higher education are both needed and imminent based on sheer market demands. They write “today the traditional university’s challenge is to change in ways that decrease its price premium and increase its contributions to students and society” (Christensen & Eyring, 2011, p. 396).

Borrowing from research in business, Christensen and Eyring assert that online learning represents a disruptive technology that will prove to be a game-changer in higher education. Of course, this comes as no surprise to most of the faculty at UIS; we’re innovative leaders in this realm. But The Innovative University critique cannot be reduced to a simple appeal in favor of more use of technology in education. Christensen and Eyring are arguing for nothing less than a remodeling of our higher education system, and they identify a number of critical dimensions in need of re-examination.

Now, knowing a little about the thesis of the book before I began reading it, I was most curious to know the authors’ views on faculty scholarship. After all, I wondered, if they were going to call for a more efficient delivery of education to the masses through the use of online learning, would they also see faculty scholarship as a superfluous and wasteful activity for non-Research I institutions? Perhaps they would argue that faculty at regional and comprehensive universities should resign themselves to being mere course designers, content to simply read and stay current in their fields by passively absorbing the discoveries and new developments generated by Research I faculty. In fact, some public and private liberal arts institutions have gone just that route, with their faculty largely focusing on what I am going to call passive scholarship – reading the literature in their fields, staying current on new developments and trends, integrating those into their courses, but focusing their efforts primarily on the teaching and mentoring of undergraduate students.

Christensen and Eyring wouldn’t be the first in higher education in recent years to question the value of faculty time devoted to scholarship. A number of well-recognized leaders in higher education have been calling for universities and colleges to direct more faculty time and energy toward the education of undergraduates and to efforts that meet current national and social needs, and concomitantly, less toward scholarship. Such calls are not new but rather were apparent even in the 1980s. In fact, such concerns were a major impetus for research conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and led by its president at the time, Ernest Boyer. As you know, that
research resulted in several ground-breaking reports, including *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), which has significantly shaped our definition of scholarship at UIS. I’ll come back to Christensen and Eyring’s view on scholarship in a bit, but at this point, let’s consider for a moment the definition of scholarship.

As it turns out, some of the challenges we face in conveying to the public a sense of the real work involved in teaching and scholarship may be traceable to the history of the word and the profession itself. The American word *scholarship* is derived from the Greek word *schole*, meaning that which occurs in leisure, as well as lecture and discussion — in other words, the time away from practical matters of work, taken for the purpose of engaging in reflection, discussion, and reasoning (Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, p. 1045; Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language, 1979, p. 1274). The word *scholarship* is also related to the Latin root word *schola*, meaning *a school* (Late Latin *scholaris*: relating to a school), which is also associated with time free from sustaining work – time devoted to passive learning. This is not surprising because, historically, formally engaging in education in many cultures was limited to a select few whose resources allowed them free time; it was most decidedly not for the working classes. So, to some extent, comments like those of Shaw simply echo remnants of the idea that teaching is passive and not real work, as reflected in the origins of our word for scholarship itself.

But what of contemporary definitions of the word *scholarship*? Two primary contemporary definitions are of particular interest. The first definition of scholarship references the quality of knowledge and learning shown by a student. The other definition refers to the systematized knowledge of a learned person. Now, the interesting thing about these definitions is that they are passive, and they make no distinction between acquiring existing knowledge versus discovering or creating new knowledge. To be sure, most scholars do both, but I am going to suggest that there is something of tremendous value in explicitly distinguishing between the two forms of knowledge acquisition. What we are celebrating today is clearly active scholarship, and I’m going to assert that active scholarship should be and is at the heart of the teacher-scholar model here at UIS.

Both active and passive forms of scholarship can start with inquiry and intent to discover an answer for that inquiry. But the real difference emerges when we determine whether anyone else has previously asked and answered the same inquiry. I’ve already alluded to a definition of passive
scholarship as staying current with the existing literature in one’s academic field and/or the profession of teaching – in other words, maintaining the currentness of one’s academic knowledge and professional expertise by following the emerging literature in one’s field – by following the new knowledge generated through the active scholarship of others. This is a direct parallel to the scholarship of students. I would estimate that at least 90% of the time, the scholarship of our undergraduate students is passive. We refer to their essays and papers as scholarship, but we’re typically evaluating those works to determine the breadth and depth of their understanding – not for their independent contributions to our fields.

Active scholarship, by way of contrast, starts with active inquiry but, finding no previous answer – or no acceptable previous answer, active scholarship initiates a process of knowledge generation, illumination, or discovery. In other words, there is an important distinction here between finding an answer in someone else’s work and discovering something new. Active scholarship is not just library or web-based information searching; it always involves revelation of something new; it starts with inquiry on the edge of the unknown, and then it leads, rather than follows the work of others.

Now, clearly, the most accomplished scholars engage in both forms of scholarship, and passive scholarship must necessarily be a prelude to active scholarship in the sense of preparing for a new process of discovery, but I think there is much to be gained by fully appreciating the unique process by which knowledge is generated. And the fundamental nature of that process has been clearly specified.

Generalizing from work by Sir Karl Popper (1992) and Thomas Kuhn (1996) concerning the fundamental nature of the scientific process, Wilber (1998) points out that all valid forms of knowledge are generated through a process anchored in three essential features. The scholar selects an appropriate method of inquiry based upon informed knowledge in the field and methods within his or her discipline. The scholar skillfully applies the methods to address the focus of inquiry and generate new information. And then a system of informed communal verification of process and outcome (peer review) is engaged. Under communal verification, the actions taken by the scholar, the results of those actions, and the alleged outcome must all be subjected to scrutiny and verification by a relevant community of academic or professional peers. This then is the essence of the process of active scholarship, no matter what category of scholarship we select. It is a process of knowledge generation and quality assurance when conducted with integrity.
Now, those of you who have read Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* may be thinking that you don’t recall anything of this process being explicitly discussed in that book, and you’d be correct about that. *Scholarship Reconsidered* focuses on describing four categories of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. And you might also be thinking that I have just suggested that all categories of scholarship identified by Boyer can be reduced to the scholarship of discovery, but I hasten to add that this is most definitely not my intent. What I am suggesting instead is that the process of active scholarship is essential and common to all categories of scholarship defined by Boyer.

While Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* did not explicitly speak to a common process for all categories of scholarship, the process of knowledge generation is implied and subsequently became the foundation for standard-setting in a later follow-up report, entitled *Scholarship Assessed* (1997), by Charles Glassick and his associates. *Scholarship Assessed* was intended to more fully explicate the nature of scholarship represented by Boyer’s categories and to present a conceptual framework as well as a set of standards for evaluating the less traditional categories – integration, application, and teaching. Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff wrote:

> The effort to broaden the meaning of scholarship simply cannot succeed until the academy has clear standards for evaluating this wider range of scholarly work. After all, administrators and professors accord full academic value only to work they can confidently judge….At The Carnegie Foundation, we are convinced that it is indeed possible to find standards that can be applied to each kind of scholarly work, that can organize the documentation of scholarly accomplishments, and that can also guide a trustworthy process of faculty evaluation. (p. 5)

> To give the four kinds of scholarly activities the weight that each deserves, they all must be held to the same standards of scholarly performance. The paradox is this: in order to recognize discovery, integration, application, and teaching as legitimate forms of scholarship, the academy must evaluate them by a set of standards that capture and acknowledge what they share as scholarly acts. (p. 22)
The process of active scholarship identified by Glassick and his colleagues has six phases, each of which is associated with requirements indicative of intellectual rigor and high quality. The six phases are (a) setting clear goals for the work, (b) ensuring adequate preparation in terms of knowledge of the field, (c) selecting and applying appropriate methods, (d) generating results of value, (e) effectively presenting the work to relevant audiences, and (f) reflectively evaluating and critiquing the validity and quality of the work. This is exactly the process, generically cast, that Popper and Kuhn were concerned with in their explications of the way in which valid knowledge in science is generated.

Thus, we can be certain that the heart of scholarship under the Boyer model is active scholarship – scholarly actions for which passive scholarship is a necessary but not sufficient foundation. We might say that Boyer and his colleagues effectively overcame the hegemony of unitary basic research, but Glassick and his colleagues clarified Boyer’s work and revealed the common qualities and real value of all forms of legitimate scholarship. All result in and contribute to new knowledge.

From this perspective, if as a scholar your focus of inquiry is the nearest supernova, you use your accumulated knowledge to frame the specific focus of inquiry and then apply your skills in telescopic observation and data collection and analysis to generate information, and then you interpret that information relative to the questions posed. We would categorize this as the active scholarship of discovery.

If as a scholar, your focus of inquiry is the play Hamlet, or a truth revealed therein, you would use your accumulated knowledge to frame the specific focus of inquiry and then apply your disciplinary skills (whether of history, literature, playwriting, direction, acting, psychology, etc.) and use your observations of the human condition to generate new revelations in relation to the play. Your work would be subject to review and critique by a relevant community of scholars. Depending on the nature of your inquiry, this might be categorized as the active scholarship of discovery or perhaps of integration.

A key element of the active scholarship of integration, no matter what academic field the scholar represents, is that it results in an original contribution to the field. In other words, it differs from merely abstracting and aggregating the work of others for presentation as a lecture in a course. Active scholarship results in a new understanding in the field.
If as a scholar, your focus of inquiry is to determine the socioeconomic impact and value of a grant-funded program in the social services sector – regardless of whether that program is local, regional, or national in scope-- you would again follow a similar process of active scholarship from your field. Based on the scholar’s expertise in a relevant field, she or he would select the appropriate tools of inquiry, gather data or evidence of impact, analyze and interpret the evidence, and prepare a document that makes the process and findings transparent to enable review and critique by a relevant community of peers and informed stakeholders. This is the scholarship of application or engagement.

And finally if one conducts active scholarship of teaching, similar parameters apply. Consider for example the development of a new model course. To qualify as active scholarship, the scholar would need to develop a plan of inquiry that begins with goal-setting and is informed by passive scholarship in relevant areas of content and in best practices in teaching and active learning. Using the appropriate tools and methods, he or she would develop a map of the course, follow that map in actualizing the course components, and gather data to demonstrate learning outcomes relevant to the learning goals established in the course plan. The process and product would need to be subject to peer review and critique. The resulting product would need to represent a new contribution in the realm of teaching.

Of course, this isn’t the only approach to the scholarship of teaching. There are faculty members at UIS who pose questions about teaching and learning, gather student learning data through their courses, analyze that data, write papers describing their research and findings, and submit the written results for peer reviewed presentation or publication. This, too, is the scholarship of teaching. It is active scholarship that results in new knowledge in the field of teaching and learning. It is not merely summarizing the work of others as all scholarly teachers do to prepare a lecture based on the work of others.

If one merely researches and integrates existing knowledge into a new course, one has engaged in passive scholarship. But without having consciously invoked and actualized the process underlying all valid forms of scholarship, including transparent explication and independent peer review by a community of scholars with relevant expertise, one has not met the requirements of active scholarship. As Berman argued in a 1998 paper entitled “Reconsidering Scholarship Reconsidered”, it can be considered scholarly course preparation, but it is not the scholarship of teaching.
So, what then is the value of active scholarship in the context of the teacher-scholar model at UIS and as defined under Boyer’s expanded view of scholarship? From my perspective, active scholarship is that which identifies the true teacher-scholar as a creative source of new knowledge of consequence, as something more than a lifelong student of the discipline and a technician of learning. Whether focused on questions large or small, the inquiry of the true scholar is driven by more than mere curiosity or even love of learning – the true scholar is driven by a passion for creating new knowledge.

No matter the category of scholarship, the true scholar, working at the edge of the unknown, invokes the skillful and yet creative application of the methods of her or his discipline to answer the call of inquiry. The transparent and identifiable process by which this occurs, as beautifully outlined by Glassick and associates, is at once inherently individual and communal, methodical and yet unique, in each occurrence. Active scholarship is exactly the exercise of academic freedom to advance knowledge of consequence, and universities in which active scholarship is valued and celebrated are alive with creative energy. Such energy lends the freshness of new possibilities and the excitement of discovery to teaching and mentoring. This, I think, is the real essence of scholarship in the context of the teacher-scholar model, and it is the scholarship that we celebrate today.

So, what do Christensen and Eyring (2011) recommend regarding scholarship? Do they believe that faculty scholarship is a dysfunctional remnant symptomatic of Harvard-envy – a genetic defect as it were? In a word -- no. Rather, Christensen and Eyring view the discovery, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge as “critical, unique functions” of the communities of scholars that universities represent (p. xxv). Of equal importance for us, more than 20 years after Scholarship Reconsidered was published, Christensen and Eyring reference and strongly endorse Boyer’s model of diversity in scholarship. In fact, with no small bit of irony involved, they actually cite the Harvard School of Business as an example of a prestigious institution whose faculty scholarship reflects the Boyer model. Far from calling for universities to abandon scholarship, they write:

University communities that focus their activities and measure success in terms of absolute performance rather than relative rank can enjoy a bright future. If they suppress the compulsion to have everything and instead play to their unique strengths they can achieve much more than
they do now….They can serve more of their chosen students at higher levels of quality. They can become more expert in their chosen subjects and practice more individually customized and more influential scholarship. They can contribute more to the intellectual, economic, and moral vitality of the country and the world. (Christensen & Eyring, 2011, p. 401)

Sounds a lot like UIS doesn’t it? The Boyer categories of scholarship – integration, application, and teaching, as well as traditional discovery – represent active scholarship. They provide us with tremendous flexibility in our choices for scholarship, allowing us to engage in work that is meaningful and of practical value to our students, our academic disciplines, and our communities. Despite our disciplinary differences, under the teacher-scholar model, we share an identity as active scholars whose engagement with the process of inquiry results in knowledge of relevance in the world, and whose passion for teaching is informed by and can result in active scholarship. In clear contrast to Shaw’s old adage, the faculty of UIS can and do exercise their expertise in the world -- and they also teach -- and teach well. At UIS, critical thinking and creativity, informed inquiry, and teaching are most certainly not superfluous activities of leisure. Our work is challenging and of consequence. These are, I think, very good reasons indeed to celebrate your accomplishments as active scholars today.

Thank you all for joining in today’s celebration, and best wishes for successful endeavors in the months ahead.


