

# On Becoming a Scholar

On entering a university career, the new academic is likely to carry one or more identities including those of lecturer, researcher, scholar and even intellectual. Occasionally, all these identities reside in the same person. Some of these identities are normally bestowed by others (like intellectual) while a particular identity might be chosen or preferred by the academic herself (such as lecturer/teacher rather than researcher). A few of these identities are not limited to university occupation (like researcher or intellectual). Several of these identities might overlap in meaning, and even signal the same thing—such as academic and lecturer. More often, however, these identities are understood as having distinctive properties; a lecturer, for example, is typically understood in South Africa as a rank of employment within HR (human resource) gradations while an intellectual is more broadly understood as a social commentator or thinker beyond the confines of his or her discipline.

In his widely-cited book, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities for the professoriate*, Ernest Boyer gave conceptual flesh to the word scholarship by distinguishing the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of teaching, the scholarship of application and the scholarship of integration.<sup>a</sup> The value of Boyer's conceptualization is that it elevates the routine functions of academic work in terms of scholarship. What Boyer does not do, however, is to expand on the attributes of those who do scholarship i.e. the scholar, and this is the short contribution on offer in this editorial.

The assumption is that a scholar, in broad terms, is someone who understands the deep knowledge of his/her discipline<sup>b</sup>, is able to draw connections between specialist knowledge and everyday life, and can articulate clearly why such knowledge matters.

In elaborating on the distinctive attributes of a scholar, one needs to separate strong scholars from ordinary academics. Indeed, from observations of distinguished scholars in leading universities around the world, I have developed the following schema to describe what they do, how they do it, and perhaps most importantly, who they are. Leading scholars, in my view can be identified by the following attributes:

1. definition---a strong scholar has a sharp focus that delimits the area of inquiry in which s/he works. A young academic who works on more than one research focus is likely to fail in developing a complex, depth and sophisticated understanding of any of the topics under investigation. In the post-PhD period, this development of a long-term research identity is crucially dependent on sharp definition. The advice of an established scholar might well be: 'work on one thing, and do that well'.
2. disposition---a strong scholar is marked by what could be called academic poise. Such a person has a natural skepticism about knowledge claims, is self-critical about her best work, questions what others take for granted, and sees value in uncertainty. Such a person is naturally inquisitive about the world in and beyond the focus of his/her specialization. On completing an oral defense of the doctoral dissertation, a colleague evaluated the performance with these words: "I did not hear a scholarly voice." In other words, there was no evidence of a scholarly disposition.
3. immersion---a strong scholar is completely immersed in the literature around her topic, and is intimately familiar with and knowledgeable about both the classical and most recent literatures in the area of inquiry. Such a scholar is also conscious of how her research both builds on and departs from or extends established wisdom on the topic of interest. The mark of a scholar is therefore one who reads voraciously within and around the borders of the discipline.
4. authority---a strong scholar is articulate about her area of inquiry and can speak with authority and clarity about what it is she researches, why and with what hypotheses. Such clarity is only possible if immersion in the research literature is a reality in the life of the established or aspirant scholar. Clarity implies, in this case, the ability of the scholar to communicate clearly and fluently his/her area of research to non-experts.
5. persistence---a strong scholar shows a dogged determination to 'get to the bottom of things', a resoluteness in seeking deep explanations for events, a persistence despite repeated cul-de-sacs typically encountered the course of investigation. Leading scholars typically disappear from view, travel around the globe, become stuck in the basement of libraries—all in pursuit of some evidence despite the fact that such a slice of data might well eventually appear simply as a crucial footnote in a scholarly book.
6. passion---a strong scholar is passionate, and seen to be passionate, about what she studies. The topic or focus of investigation excites and enthuses the scholar, and explains the persistence in pursuing a complex problem or concern. It is therefore crucial that in deciding on that singular focus or topic, it is something that can carry the scholar through lonely and frustrating times before the great work sees the light of publication.

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- a. By 'discovery' Boyer means inquiry, or what we traditionally call 'research' into knowledge; application refers to the service role of academic knowledge; integration means the drawing together of knowledge from across disciplines; and teaching as an act that extends and deepens, rather than simply transmits, knowledge.
  - b. I deploy the term 'discipline' here as a convenient catch-call phrase that includes the many ways in which the traditional 'disciplines' are configured, including trans-, multi- and interdisciplinary forms of scholarly inquiry.

7. connection---a strong scholar is well-networked with and among the leading international scholars in his field of interest; such a person is also highly mobile i.e. beyond electronic networking, also visible and seen to contribute in the two or three most important international research conferences in the area of focus. These scholars are regularly in contact with their peers around the world. Such an ideal is only possible, of course, through published work, in the right places and that in this way catches the eye of important actors in the discipline.
8. recognition---a strong scholar is easily recognized among her peers as a bright, up-and-coming scholar, and increasingly called on to participate in various research and writing activities as a result of the promising quality of her work. Established scholars seek out promising scholars, award them, invite them, visit them, write with them, speak about them and advance their cause. This recognition, when it comes, is the single most important leverage in the transformation from academic to scholar.
9. productivity---a strong scholar is highly productive through published and presented research. Such scholars apply a high degree of selectivity in making decisions as to where to appear and with what kinds of research reports. Productivity here means more than the mechanical production of research papers for publication; it means choosing the right journals, at the right times; it means working one's writings 'up' starting with local then international and eventually into the most prestigious journals in the field. In the natural sciences, the pinnacle of such a productive life might mean appearing in the pages of journals like *Science* or *Nature*. In the humanities, it often means the production of that seminal book that redefines the field. In both cases it means the regular

presentation of well-researched published work in the right forums.

10. competitiveness---a strong scholar constantly seeks opportunities in which to compete for the best research grants, the prominent scholarly awards and all other kinds of competitive events that recognize and support outstanding work. Timidity or a false sense of humility hold little value in the world of scholarship. Constructive competition is not only a valuable learning experience for the scholar--it also draws attention to her/his work. The scholar knows that s/he is established when those awards are bestowed rather than competed for on the international stage.

Universities are populated by academics, many of whom are preoccupied with moving through the ranks defined by the Human Resources Department: lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, and so on. In the annual promotion season, academics often scramble to ensure that they meet the minimum requirements for advancement to the next rank. Such a desire for migration through the ranks is of course understandable in monetary and status terms. It is, however, a far less worthy ambition than the quest to become a scholar.

#### Reference

1. Boyer, Ernest L. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1990.

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