Working with Institutional Artisans
Re-envisioning Practitioner Participation in Commons Governance

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DECEMBER 10, 2010 - COMMONSCRAFT WORKING PAPER[1]

Abstract. How can or should applied social scientists work with communities seeking to govern shared resources? Concepts of co-evolving discursive communities, helping self-help, and citizen problem-solving offer ways of envisioning work with institutional artisans. Respectful engagement in institutional artisanship may require balancing roles as consultant, teacher, official, or researcher, and thinking through the implications of relationships as peer, partner, advisor, and citizen. Rethinking roles and visions can make social scientists more effective in working with citizens of co-evolving communities in adapting governance of commons. Keywords: Institutional design; crafting commons, international development, participation, environmental governance

INTRODUCTION

Adapting governance. How can social science practitioners work with communities to solve problems concerning resources they manage together? Participation still tends to be defined in terms of how communities can take part in projects initiated and controlled by outsiders, not about whether, when, or how outsiders might take part in activities determined by communities that reflect their ideas and objectives. This essay looks from the other direction, to ask about how social science practitioners can participate in working with communities, in ways that respect their roles as institutional artisans.

Over years of visiting irrigation groups, as a researcher and as a consultant for development projects, I began to wonder more and more about the other roles that I might play or be playing, offering advice beyond the immediate scope of project activities, as a fellow human being, as a citizen concerned with justice and good governance. After living abroad for seventeen years, I returned to live in my home country, and joined a community group concerned with preserving the local quality of life and the environment. This let me see the world from a different perspective, not as an expert with the borrowed power of a government agency or authority of an academic position, but simply as a resident and citizen. In reflecting on this experience, and trying to think through how I would like to act in the future, it became useful to think more systematically about the range of possible roles.

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[1] The initial version of this paper was prepared while a Visiting Scholar at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University Bloomington. The hospitality of the workshop is gratefully acknowledged. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Society for Applied Anthropology Meeting in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico March 24-27, 2010, and in a Colloquium at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University Bloomington, October 22, 2010. © CC-BY-SA

This essay grows out of experience as a practitioner working on irrigation and water resources management, and a growing awareness of and concern for working in ways that differ from conventional engagements in service of development projects and programs. It is an initial, personal attempt to think through ideas and stances. It draws selectively on only a few a few strands of the large literature concerned with applied anthropology and social social science practice. This essay is part of a larger project on "customizing commons," exploring ways of diversifying institutional design and adapting governance. An initial paper looked at concepts and analytic approaches useful in institutional design for commons, while a second explores how design patterns might be used to facilitate sharing of information about rules for governance of commons. This essay concentrates on a few philosophical and ethical aspects of goals and roles for engagement.

The next section of this essay frames the discussion in the context of larger issues, including the challenges to commons governance posed by expanding state influence, the need to escape from propagation of institutional monocultures (Evans 2004), and the quest to expand capabilities for freedom. Three visions are then examined: Richard Norgaard's conception of development as a patchwork of discourse among co-evolving communities, David Ellerman's recommendations about how to help people help themselves, and Vincent Ostrom's ideas on governance as problem-solving by citizens. The implications of these ideas are then discussed for a range of roles, both for rebalancing what are often highly asymmetric roles as researcher, teacher, official or consultant; and intensifying engagement in potentially more symmetric or reciprocal roles: as citizen, peer, adviser, or partner.

ADAPTING COMMONS

Taming Leviathan. James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* offers a magnificent synthesis of how putatively "traditional" communities, including those commonly studied by anthropologists in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world, have been shaped, shattered, dispersed, distorted, and otherwise influenced by the forces of state governance, from ancient to recent times, including a diverse variety of strategies for trying to avoid state control. However, he concludes in saying that escape from the state is no longer an option: "[i]n the contemporary world, the future of our freedom lies in the daunting task of taming Leviathan, not evading it." (2009, 324). Whatever the attractions of isolation, obscurity, locality, and powerlessness, they are insufficient to deal with the attractions, extractions, and other impositions that accompany a world filled by states.

It is increasingly apparent that many "traditional" commons were strongly influenced by states, either directly, or, as Scott describes, by how they fit into strategies for avoiding state actions. Responses to deforestation, loss of biodiversity, global warming, water scarcity, and other problems can be expected to lead to more, not less, efforts by states to intervene in the governance of local commons, making it all the more crucial and valuable if social scientists can be useful to communities in adapting to the challenges they face.

Beyond Panaceas. If there is no "one best way," then better tools are needed to adapt institutions to diverse and changing circumstances (Elinor Ostrom, Janssen, and Anderies 2007). Research on common property regimes has found enormous diversity in how rules are devised to fit local circumstances. Design principles offer some general guidelines about how governance of commons can be made robust. Diagnostic methods can analyze problems and constraints. However, most social science methods have been developed and applied primarily for analysis and critique, and are much less well developed as tools for helping find solutions. Design principles do identify important issues and characteristics to be considered in creating or modifying institutions. The design principles can also be used as starting points for discussion (Elinor Ostrom 2008). However, there is a great need for approaches that can help identify and assess potential remedies. This includes better methods for working with communities. It also includes ways of avoiding the risk that community goals are subordinated to those of participatory research projects or activist scholars.

Developing Freedom. Recent research on decentralization in irrigation, fisheries, and rangelands reveals a pattern of "more power, less autonomy" (Arun Agrawal 2010). Decentralization has integrated communities in implementing state projects, increasing their authority and effectiveness to accomplish specific purposes, but has not necessarily expanded their autonomous capacity to cope with broader problems. Despite rhetoric, and perhaps good intentions, concerning devolution, participation and empowerment, communities may end up bound into new patterns of subordination. While there are interesting empirical questions about how this occurs, and under what conditions, a more important challenge for vision and action concerns finding approaches that can help to increase positive freedom, in the sense of autonomous capabilities, "power to," or "power with."

VISIONS

Co-evolving communities. "A coevolving patchwork quilt of discursive communities" is how Richard Norgaard (Norgaard 1994) summarizes a vision of cultures not isolation, but interacting; not in hierarchies of dominance and exclusion, but linked in networks; not in orderly uniformity, but in beautiful diversity; not in imposed inclusion, but in plural conversations. There are, of course, many other possible visions, but this provides one useful point of reference. It comes at the conclusion of an incisive analysis of the flaws and destruction of imposed development, and seeks to suggest what might be possible instead.

Such a vision offers space for imagined communities (Anderson 1991) and negotiated identities, for cultural creativity and recreation. Such interaction could occur at multiple scales, whether potluck picnics in a local park, a weekly market among neighboring villages, a cosmopolitan city of diverse neighborhoods, or global conversations among cultures woven along the electronic channels of the internet. Such visions offer an important alternative to an imperial modernism that would erase differences into anonymous uniformity. Such a co-evolving discourse would allow space for many pursuits and goals, which may be contested or combined, not just material consumptions, but happiness, social justice, ecological restoration, spiritual growth and a host of others.

Helping people help themselves. Amidst huge disparities of power, wealth, and knowledge, and in a world where ideas of equity and justice evoke demands for redistribution and assistance, a central challenge is how to help people help themselves, and how to avoid the kind of malevolent benevolence that patronizes, disempowers, and worsens inequity. From a perch high in the World Bank, David Ellerman (2001; Ellerman and Hirschman 2006;

Ellerman 2007), developed a critique of the dangers of unhelpful help, that either overrides or undermines the autonomy of those being helped. Synthesizing ideas from a range of thinkers, Ellerman propounded some core principles, expressed as do's and don't's, for aid that enhances autonomy:

1. Don't impose transformation
2. Don't undercut self-help with benevolence

1. Do start from present institutions
2. Do see the world through the client's eyes
3. Do respect autonomy of the doers

Ellerman acknowledges the difficulty of doing so in the context of the World Bank's bureaucratic structures and cultures, and institutional imperatives for disbursing money, that often work against fulfilling such principles. Other kinds of organizations may offer somewhat friendlier conditions for pursuing such principles, for working in ways that could more easily pass a test of symmetry, a golden rule to do as you would be done by.

The principles identified by Ellerman offer important guidance. They may be even more powerful if read from the other side. They state criteria that those being offered aid might insist on, if the aid is genuinely intended to be helpful and respectful. However, there are several limitation to his ideas, or aspects which would be improved by complementary ideas.

Underlying Ellerman's ideas seems to still be a technocratic concept of development, where the objectives are relatively clear, the question is only the best way to accomplish them. This appears to be another attempt to evade politics, to pretend that that there are not conflicts about values and objectives. It also seems to assume that there actually is one best way to achieve objectives, which is a matter of following the right principles. If there are multiple values, within individuals and between them, and processes are as important or even more important than products, and much is unknown about preferences and the feasibility of different actions, then the situation becomes far more complex. This is where a view politics as a way of working out collective decisions, imperfect but inevitable, can contribute to a more workable understanding of the context within which aid may be offered and used.

While Ellerman acknowledges the issues of elites, the risks of power being abused, and multiple levels of action, his vision still seems largely state-centric, where national governments are the primary actors. Viewed from the World Bank, whose clients are governments, this may make sense, but is easily distorted into ideas about "ownership" that become complicit with perpetuating control of elites and centralized bureaucracies. A more explicit vision of polycentric governance, not just at multiple "levels," but at multiple scales, and for multiple sectors and forms of association and collective action offers a much richer landscape for considering what might be done.

Ellerman provides a deep discussion of the challenges of providing altruistic aid. However, it risks becoming a "counsel of perfection" where "the best is the enemy of the good." It is unbalanced in that there is little consideration of what other values and goals may also need to be considered, and mutually adjusted. It is not clear where this altruism comes from. Good intentions are assumed. His analysis risks being wise advice for saints, and for those pursuing autarchy, but losing relevance to those who pursue multiple interests, selfish and shared. Thus, the helper-doer relationship is not the only possibility, and there may be various forms of partnership and negotiation to pursue objectives of mutual interest.

A more fundamental issue may be Ellerman's conception of autonomy, which seems to be an interpretation of Kantian autonomy that interprets autonomy as largely as synonymous with independence, not being controlled by another, and not using others as instruments. This might be good for saintly hermits isolated in the desert, aiding the occasional passer-by or solo seeker of wisdom. However, it would be more workable if more closely integrated with autonomy where freedom and capabilities (Sen 2000) are what can be realized within mutual interdependence, interdependence within which there are choices, negotiations, contesting alternatives, and options for exit.

Citizens solving problems. In trying to formulate alternative visions of what development might be, if it is not to be the imposition of a uniform modernism, benevolent or otherwise, Vincent Ostrom's ideas about institutional artisanship by citizens working together to solve problems offer an important source of ideas (V. Ostrom 1980; Vincent Ostrom 1997). These draw heavily on the ideas of earlier thinkers, most notably Tocqueville, the authors of the Federalist Papers (Madison, Hamilton, and Jay) and Hobbes. Polycentric governance provides multiple ways in which people can come together to act. Not only individuals, but different organizations may cooperate in local public economies and broader areas to provide goods and services which would not be forthcoming from markets in purely private goods. Power is not something to be abdicated or escaped, but instead something to be handled with caution, as a dangerous, powerful and necessary tool (in a "Faustian" bargain), most effectively dealt with by sharing power. This emphasizes not power *over* but power *with*, distributed among multiple bodies and levels, arranged with checks and balances. Governance institutions cannot be designed for angels, saints, philosopher kings, or benevolent dictators, but instead need to be constituted to they can function for ordinary human beings with all their faults and foibles, talents and desires. Reasoning together is essential. Consensus is desirable and language both a means and a constraint, but the greater challenge lies in having ways of making decisions when there is not unanimity or consensus, and finding ways to balance interests, and achieve a necessary efficiency in governance. On these issues and others the ideas of Vincent Ostrom help to point out some of the methods available for arranging institutions so they develop the power to solve problems together.

If one wants a more democratic alternative to a centralized leviathan, then the challenge can be framed as one of learning to work together more effectively, to have *power with* rather than power over. Institutional artisanship then becomes not a specialized task for a few technicians, but instead an essential part of citizenship, in multiple scales and forms, to find ways to use power wisely to achieve shared goals, seeking to keep the institutions and agents of governance as servants rather than masters.

Research on irrigation and other commons has shown the diversity of solutions crafted by communities to govern shared resources, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding over generations. If waiting for the state to solve problems is often futile, and sometimes fatal, then what matters is the room for maneuver, the opportunities that can be created for a problem-solving society. Various forms of self-governance may work with, through, against, or beside national and more local forms of governance.

In practical terms, for forests and other resources, this may occur through forms of *environmentality* (A. Agrawal 2005), as people change their ideas about how think about and act to shape their environment. Definitions of problems and solutions are shaped not only by bureaucratic strictures, but embedded in culture and discourse, and the rules, debates, and decisions through which communities may learn to protect and enhance resources to which they have access. Institutional artisanship is thus not limited to the grandeur of constitutional architecture, but to the mundane words and rules for tasks such as gathering firewood, harvesting fruit, or catching fish.

ROLES

Citizen. Social scientists are moral actors, deliberately or unwittingly. Some may try to restrict themselves to the ostensible publication and teaching of "facts" but even then funding for research and teaching rests on presumptions of utility, and research questions often at least partially derive from personal values. Many forms of action, whether simply helping friends, or wider political advocacy can be seen as acting as a member of a community, a citizen of a nation-state, or activist working on more global issues. Roles as scholar-activists offer one way to frame a combination of scholarly practice and political engagement, but this is far from the only way in which social scientists can act as citizens, speaking to their governments, collaborating with other citizens, and working to solve shared problems.

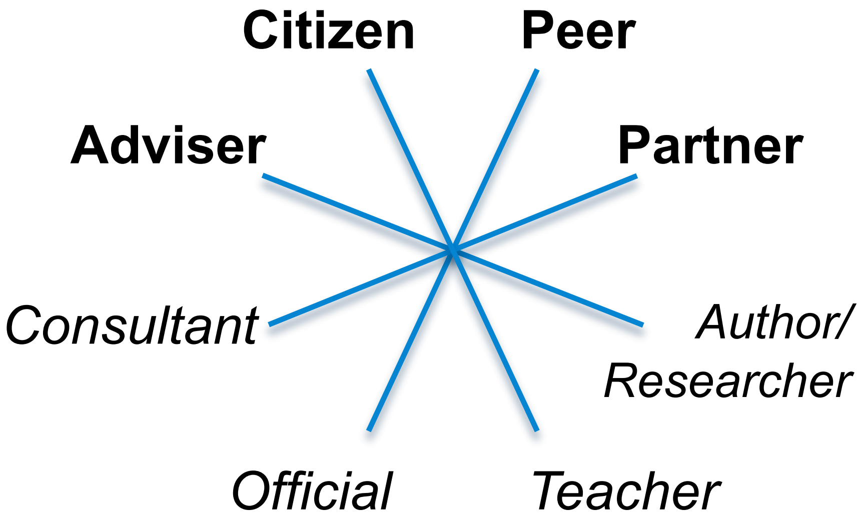

Figure 1. Roles for Practitioners

Speaking as a citizen is an engagement in conversation and collective problems solving. Acting as a practitioner and citizen means taking responsibilities seriously. For customizing commons that means arguing for the value of institutional diversity, both the instrumental benefits of fitting governance to local conditions and the more basic reasons for local self-determination. That means local choices not in isolation but as part of wider discourse about the challenge of meeting multiple goals in environmental management of freshwater, forest, and seas.

Peer. Researchers are human, and so share the daily trials and tribulations, minor and major, of hunger and happiness, sickness and joy, of family life and friendship. Exchanging ideas and favors, relaxing or working together, eating meals, or waiting for a bus into town, are essential parts of participant observation and of ordinary life. In Gerald Berreman's (1972) account of research in the hills of northern India, he recounts overhearing someone ask asking who he was, and the reply, after a brief hesitation, was "oh, he lives here." Acting as a peer provides a basis for empathy, humility and reciprocity. In contrast to assumptions of power that may underlie some roles, being a peer means sharing limitations, listening to others.

Partner. Collaboration on joint projects can create partnerships, which might be framed as participatory research, or community science. Joint investment of time, effort, money and other resources creates a shared stake. While the rhetoric of "partnership" is often invoked, a substantive partnership is likely to be documented in a written agreement, such as a contract or memorandum of agreement. In some cases, agreement may be verbal, but based on a relatively thorough discussion of responsibilities, In other cases, a working relationship might over time build up a set of common understandings, and mutual investments, that establishes an effective partnership even without a structured agreement. Partnership makes it important to disclose roles, invite cooperation, and negotiate agreements.

Adviser. Informal advice is a common currency of friendship and everyday interaction. Specialized knowledge offers a basis for sharing information and making recommendations. In terms of local environmental governance, advice can be fitted to the particulars of time and place, and so may become much more useful than generic publications. Relevant examples can be identified and described. Lessons from experience can be shared, along with analytic insights.

In some cases, acting as an adviser might involve functioning as a facilitator or resource person, but then the role shades into becoming more of a consultant, albeit perhaps as an unpaid volunteer, but with more specific expectations about activities and outputs. To the extent that engagement may involve trying to persuade or lobby others, testify on their behalf, then the role might be better seen as one of being a citizen or activist. Similarly, if the relationship involves planning or carrying out a joint program of activities, with shared goals and shared investment of time and effort, then it would move from simply being an adviser to becoming a partner.

Consultant. Roles as a consultant bring practitioners into contact with communities, typically with the borrowed power and pre-determined mandates of an agency employing them. Much less common, but of particular interest for this discussion, are situations where they are hired to serve a community, such as a tribal government, temporarily, for specific activities as a consultant, or more generally, as an employee. Typically, terms of reference define services to be provided as part of a contract, or these may be laid out in a letter. Some forms of volunteer work may create similar relationships, which even though unpaid, define responsibilities and outputs.

Even if terms of reference have been determined by others, there may well be scope for interpreting them in ways that are of service to communities. This can even be construed as a duty, an ethical obligation not to treat people in a purely extractive or instrumental manner, but instead to ensure that they also gain. In day-to-day terms, service may be as simple as ensuring there is time to answer questions, making a two-way exchange rather than a one-way interview. It can also encompass the whole range of concerns addressed in this paper, about finding ways to work with communities, rather than simply reporting on them or making recommendations to others.

Official. Many practitioners end up in official roles working for government agencies, international development organizations and non-government organizations. Much rarer, but of special relevance to this discussion, are roles as an employee or official of a community-controlled entity, such as a local government, foundation, or trust. Positions of authority can be enacted in terms of service leadership, finding ways to make others effective.

Negotiation with those affected goes beyond simple consultation to create a space for joint creation. Concepts of co-management provide ways of structuring and analyzing such relationships. In irrigation, one way of embodying co-management is through service agreements, specifying the obligations of those managing different parts of an irrigation, typically an agency operating dams and major canals, and water user associations receiving water and delivering it to fields.

Teacher. Writing and teaching are the most conventional roles for academic social scientists, but ones in which the utility of their work for communities is likely, at best to be indirect. However, those who come from communities and become academic social scientists may often play interesting dual roles. And practitioners may end up teaching courses to students who are community members. Working with people as institutional artisans puts a premium of effectively informing people, making knowledge accessible, showing how it can be translated into practice. Such popularization requires quite different ways of communicating than those of academic articles and classes.

Author. Typically, the articles, books, dissertations, and reports of social scientists are aimed at academic and bureaucratic audiences, phrased in professional jargon. However, more self-conscious and ethically-concerned anthropologist have shown increasing concern for “reporting back” to those they have studied, and trying to present findings in ways that are accessible and useful. Much more can also be done to start from local questions, rather than from the esoteric concerns of a particular subdiscipline. Engagement in local problem-solving provides a way to better understand the constraints and opportunities of a particular situation.

CONCLUSIONS

Work with institutional artisans should be based on conscious consideration of what values to pursue. Critique can be useful and temptingly easy, but a wiser course is to also orient inquiry not so much in terms of what we would like to oppose, resist, or subvert but instead to actively identify what kinds of futures we seek. Discourse among co-evolving communities, helping people help themselves, and problem-solving by citizens illustrate ways of working with communities engaged in institutional artisanship for environmental governance: sharing water, fostering forests, cultivating fisheries, or managing other resources at least partially governed through some form of common property institutions.

Thinking through multiple roles offers a way to devise effective working relationships. Practice can be done as part of citizenship in policy debate and political problem-solving. Acknowledgement of equality establishes a foundation for empathy, respect, and realism about the scope for change. Time can be allocated for two-way sharing of ideas. Agreement can be negotiated about responsibilities and investments in partnership. Conventional roles can also be rethought. Consulting duties may be interpreted to ensure they include duties to serve communities. Officials can engage in joint problem-solving and co-management. Teaching and research can respond to local questions, sharing insights and tentative answers along the way and reporting results in useful and easily understood ways.

Work with institutional artisans can be framed within relationships among co-evolving communities, working together with citizens acting to solve social problems. To the extent cooperation occurs asymmetrically as "aid" or "assistance" between unequals, it can be arranged to respect and enhance the capabilities of those involved. This may be woven into various roles, as a relatively equal peer or partner, but also in various roles that serve communities, as an adviser, consultant, official, teacher, researcher or author.

Work with institutional artisans can thus be framed in terms of alternative approaches that are not defined by the conventional terms, dichotomies, and disparities of international development discourse. Such work need not be framed as part of, or explicitly in opposition to or as an alternative to development discourse, and complementary forms of critique. Instead it may offer different ways of acting, different approaches to practice, within various forms and roles of interaction. Thus, it may stand outside much of the discourse of modernism and anti-modernist versions of postmodernism and critical social theory, while appreciating how values are embedded in discourse, the opportunities for mutual learning, the challenges of engagement amidst asymmetries of power, and the creativity of open-ended processes.

It is also possible to unpack and diversify conceptions of development, as multidimensional aspects of enhancing capabilities, occurring within complex and crisscrossing currents of local and wider changes. Therefore, ideas outlined above can be part of more diverse understandings and actions amidst multiple and multilinear processes of adaptation, resilience, and transformation, encompassing much of what is discussed in terms of social and economic development, but doing so in a space of more diverse and open-ended pathways. Conventional roles, as adviser, consultant, official or researcher can be recast and reinterpreted in ways that foster mutual respect and learning together, crafting institutions, and co-creating co-evolving communities.

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