

## **Jump the Shark: A Rejoinder to Howley, Theobald, and Howley**

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It would be an understatement to say I was disappointed with the reply to our article, “A Look at the Condition of Rural Education” (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). It’s not that I’m upset that Howley et al. disagree with the article. Rather, I expected a discussion that would further the conversation about future directions for rural education research. After all, these are three of the most thoughtful and respected rural education scholars in the country. Instead, their reply has the characteristics of jumping the shark.

For those unfamiliar with the term, jump the shark refers to the moment when you realize something will never be quite as good as it once was. It’s the point when you realize that something will never be quite as good as it once was. The term was inspired by the episode of the television show *Happy Days* when Fonzi, while waterskiing wearing his trademark leather jacket, jumps over a shark in the Pacific Ocean. It was at that point that Jon Hein, creator of [jumptheshark.com](http://jumptheshark.com), and his friends knew the show would never again be the same. (For those wanting a rural equivalent, it’s when Barney Fife left Mayberry on *The Andy Griffith Show*.)

Who exactly jumped the shark in this case? I think it’s fair to suggest that Howley et al. jumped, but they’re not alone. They and others are part of a larger group that I’ll call the Rural Education Conservative Movement, a.k.a. the Rural-Cons. The Rural-Cons are not an organized group, though their perspective is dominant among rural education elites. (I realize that sounds like an oxymoron.) The Howley et al. reply highlights the Rural-Con perspective, though it does not become really evident until juxtaposed against two other perspectives: the Progressive Rurals (Pro-Rurals) and the Rural Urbans (Ru-bans, pronounced like the sandwich).

Pro-Rurals share some common values with the Rural-Cons. Fundamental among those is the belief “that there is a quality inherent in rural communities and schools that should be preserved” (p. 2). Where Pro-Rurals disagree

with the Rural-Cons is that those beliefs should not result in advocacy research that seeks to prove a predetermined result or ignores contradictory evidence. An example would be a literature review that highlights Valerie Lee’s research showing the benefits of small school size, while completely ignoring her research that finds that schools can be too small. Another example would be a study that downplays the benefits of consolidation while highlighting the negative effects. Gasp?! You mean there are some places that actually benefit from consolidation! Damn that evil Institute of Education Sciences and their minions!

It’s understandable that Howley et al. would miss the point about letting personal bias influence findings and interpretations. As Wendell Berry (2005) notes, “we humans write and read, teach and learn, at the inevitable cost of falling short” (p. 23). In this case, Howley et al. fell just short enough to have missed the next sentence in “A Look at the Condition of Rural Education”: “This viewpoint is evident in all aspects of the research process, from the selection of the research questions, to the methods employed and the interpretations made” (p. 1). The part about interpretations is the key point. Translation: The belief that rural communities and schools should be preserved should not trump scholarly integrity. Howley et al. naively or disingenuously—I can’t decide which—note that the belief in preserving rural schools and communities “is external to research design” (p. 2). Those beliefs do, of course, affect the questions one asks, the way in which one collects evidence, and the meanings given to results.

I will concede that the next sentence in “A Look at the Condition of Rural Education” is probably the stupidest ever to appear in this journal: “While this belief may be valid, it has not been substantiated by rigorous research” (p. 1). (As lead author I have to take responsibility for the statement, though I’m pretty sure I didn’t write that specific sentence.) The statement is useful in that it highlights another difference between the Pro-Rurals and Rural-Cons. Pro-Rurals agree with John Polkinghorne (1998), “[a]lthough science presents its arguments and conclusions in the guise of an objective discourse, its method is, in fact, more subtle and dependent

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upon acts of personal evaluation” (p. 16). The Rural-Cons also agree with Polkinghorne until it applies to their own research, which, of course, is completely objective. It’s easy for Howley et al. to say that “[i]n good science, doubt needs free reign” (p. 4), but it’s altogether different to apply it to one’s own work in which decades have been invested.

A common ploy of the Rural-Cons is to commit the offense that they have charged against others. In this instance, Howley et al. complain about a “narrow version of scientific research” (p. 5) that they blame for the closing of the Appalachian Collaborative Center for Learning, Assessment and Instruction in Mathematics (ACCLAIM). That doesn’t prevent them from further imposing their own “narrow version” of rural education research on the readers. For the Rural-Cons, any deviation from the approved message is addressed with a disturbing hostility.

As for the Ru-bans, these are people who treat rural schools as though they are identical to urban and suburban schools—just smaller. This perspective is prevalent in the U.S. Department of Education and their contractors. For Ru-bans, the connection between schools and communities is entirely about how the community supports the mission of school. There is little, if any, concern about how the school supports the community. It was a Ru-ban who suggested that rural schools utilize the school-within-a-school concept to maintain the sense of smallness. Let me get this straight. Step 1 is that you consolidate rural schools because they are too small. In Step 2, you create an inferior copy of what you had before. I think there are two too many steps in that plan.

Howley et al. highlight another area in which the Pro-Rurals and the Rural-Cons agree: that rural education research is more than just a matter of location. The Ru-bans contend that any study that occurs in a rural place is rural education research. In doing the analysis for “A Look at the Condition of Rural Education Research,” we tried to account for studies that just happened to occur in a rural location by labeling them as “rural context only.” I wanted to have a much broader definition of “rural context only” studies that would have been in line with what Howley et al. describe. I was a minority of one on that decision.

It’s not until the final section of the Howley et al. reply that we learn that all three authors have done work for ACCLAIM, which is “being put out of business by the folks bringing us just the sort of neat and narrow version of sci-

entific research in education adopted for the purposes of the Arnold review” (p. 5). Do you think they might be influenced by that event? Being good scholars, shouldn’t they have stated that a little earlier in the article? Remember, they’re the ones who argue for objectivity. It is at that moment when Howley et al. report an event that surely causes them to be biased, and they neither recognize nor acknowledge it that they jumped the shark. It is at that point we realize that they are unable to see how their own biases influence their work. This inability is a disservice to the rural schools and communities that they are trying to help.

I’m sure there are many who will disagree that Howley et al. have jumped the shark or that there is even a Rural-Con perspective. As someone who aligns himself with what I’ve identified as the Progressive Rural viewpoint, let me clarify something. Determining whether someone or something has jumped the shark is not a science. Nor does jumping the shark mean that Howley et al. will not continue as three of rural education’s most recognizable researchers. *Happy Days* lasted six more seasons after Fonzi jumped the shark, and Barney’s departure from *Mayberry* had little effect on *The Andy Griffith Show*’s ratings—it was still the #1 show in America when it went off the air in 1968. One thing is for certain though: We should never look at rural education research the same again.

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