

# The Pedagogic Contribution of Community Spaces and Environments in Service Learning Projects

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the use of different community-based learning spaces and environments as a pedagogical resource for student learning through university community engagement. It draws on the findings from a recently completed community engagement and service learning action research project, where students responded to NGO community requests for assistance to work in small teams with grass roots communities. The methodology included initial consultations between NGO communities and the participating students, with follow-up observations and interviews with students, the NGOs and, where possible, their grass roots community participants. This paper reports on three case studies of the action research project and compares the student, NGO and community reflections of the community engagement experience. The findings suggest that the learning spaces and environments enabled students and community members to engage in mutual learning, through a dialogic and reflective process that enabled application of discipline-based theory, as well as broader learning, related to power dynamics and sharing of knowledge between community members and students. However, the engagement initiatives require considerable preparatory discussions and ongoing dialogue between the different agencies.

**Keywords:** community engagement, community learning spaces, service learning, community learning environments

## **Introduction**

Space does not permit a lengthy exposition of the evolving concept of university community engagement (CE) and its relationship to service learning (SL), which has been discussed at length elsewhere (see for example Preece *et al.* 2012), but a brief explanation follows. Universities have traditionally espoused community service as a third, ‘public good’ mission that complements their core functions of teaching and research. In an effort to move away from the philanthropic connotation of ‘service’, the concept of ‘engagement’ gained popularity during the 1990s, when it was increasingly used to reflect a more collaborative and mutual learning relationship between community and university. The debate about CE led to discussions of how knowledge can be co-created as a non-discipline based form of knowledge that emerges from practice, coined by Gibbons (2006) as ‘Mode 2’, or ‘socially robust’ knowledge. SL has been a feature of CE in the United States for some 20 years. It is an experiential pedagogical approach, whereby students contribute to community needs and reflect on their practice as part of their assessed course work (Bringle & Hatcher 1995).

In the South African context, SL was introduced in response to the post-apartheid policy agenda for higher education. The policy purpose was twofold. On the one hand, the aim was to engender a sense of community responsibility amongst the relatively privileged population of higher education students. On the other hand, it aimed to enhance the notion of higher education as a public good, and to contribute towards the redress of the inequities of the apartheid regime (Kotecha 2011). Since then, the notion of SL has evolved as a pedagogical strategy in its own right, along the lines of the aforementioned American model. The focus of this pedagogical approach has been placed upon enabling students to develop a critical, reflective stance that explores the application of academic theory to practice in real life settings. The emphasis, therefore, is placed on how and what students learn (Hatcher & Erasmus 2008).

## **Problem Statement**

The South African context has inevitably influenced the way in which SL is practiced in this country, and writers such as Erasmus (2011) have argued for more culturally sensitive and pedagogically embedded SL curricula, which contribute to community empowerment and co-creation of knowledge. Others

such as Le Grange (2007), Kruss (2012) and O'Brien (2010) have explored different models of SL as a process and resource for knowledge creation. There has been a shift in emphasis, from simply focusing on learning gains for students, to embedding SL within CE philosophy, which argues for a community-led approach to engagement and a focus on mutual benefits from the engagement relationship (Preece 2013). Less attention, however, has been paid to exploring the way in which the community learning spaces themselves have contributed to a community-student learning relationship, and in what way those community learning spaces and their environments contribute to the co-creation of knowledge, or to the idea of knowledge in terms of knowledge of the self or enhanced understanding of others. Knowledge in CE contexts is interpreted more broadly than discipline-specific knowledge, as referred to by Gibbons (2006).

This paper draws on empirical findings from three recently completed SL case studies, in which students interacted with non-governmental organisation (NGO) organisers and grass-roots community members in urban and rural settings. It will first outline the policy context for SL and CE in South Africa, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, followed by a discussion of selected literature that addresses learning spaces and environments as pedagogical resources and the notion of SL. This will be followed by the research methodology. The final sections present the findings from student and community perspectives, which are discussed thematically, with attention to power dynamics and the contribution of community learning spaces to the co-creation or sharing of knowledge, and also some of the logistical challenges of managing this form of CE.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Policy Context***

The ideologies of CE and SL are not without their critics (see for example Butin 2010; and Higgs 2002). Nevertheless, in South Africa, there exists an enabling institutional and policy environment for CE and SL. Several national policy documents have been produced to promote these endeavours in higher education institutions. The White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education 1997:11) provided institutions of higher education with a policy mandate to 'demonstrate social responsibility [...] and their commitment to the common good by making available

expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes'. It further states that one of the goals of higher education institutions is to 'promote and develop social responsibility and awareness among students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes' (ibid.:10). This was followed by the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001), which pointed to the need for higher education to enhance their responsiveness to national needs through academic programmes, research and community service. The Higher Education Qualification Committee (HEQC) also identified knowledge-based community service as one of the three areas (together with teaching and learning and research) for quality assurance at higher education (HEQC 2006). The HEQC includes, in its publication on Institutional Audits, criteria on both SL and CE (HEQC 2004). These sentiments are reinforced in the recent White Paper on Post School Education and Training (DoHET 2013). CE remains, however, an 'unfunded policy mandate' (ibid.: 39).

It is within this national policy context that the University of KwaZulu Natal has identified Responsible Community Engagement (RCE) as one of its seven strategic goals. Accordingly, RCE seeks to 'contribute through knowledge to the prosperity and sustainability of our province [...] committing ourselves to the communities we serve in a manner that adds value' (UKZN 2012:11). More specifically, the goal points to strategies that will be employed to operationalise these commitments:

- 2.1. To 'recognise, promote and reward RCE that adds value' through activities such as 'community human capital development'; to 'educate and train UKZN students outside the university'; to conduct 'research and development'; and to undertake research that 'solves community issues and societal problems'.
- 2.2. 'Develop formal training for human capital development outside UKZN'.
- 2.3. 'Promote and expand training activities' for students outside UKZN.
- 2.4. 'Give effect to strategic partnerships that enhance the relevance' of university activities (UKZN 2012:11-12).

CE is also a key element of the academic's job profile. The approved ratio of

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the average time that academics are supposed to spend on RCE is ten percent. As yet, however, there is no official university policy on RCE. Research and scholarship around CE within the university is supposed to contribute to RCE policy. However, there are several typical barriers to policy implementation or the operationalisation of organisational goals. Some of these relate to funding limitations, weak management structures, or network coordination capacity, poor implementer incentives and weak political support (Wu *et al.* 2010). A further operational challenge for academics is how to oversee community learning spaces, including how to ensure those spaces are beneficial for all participants.

### ***Learning Spaces and Environments as a Pedagogical Resource***

The literature on learning spaces usually refers to the way in which the classroom is organised as a learning space. In this respect, there is currently a focus on making learning interactive, whereby students ‘discover knowledge rather than simply be told’ (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design 2013:1). A ‘rich’ learning *environment* is understood concomitantly as a space where learners and their facilitators ‘share meaningful experiences that go beyond the one way information flow’ (Bickford & Wright 2006:4.3) that is normally associated with formal teaching situations. The rationale for a more engaged learning experience is that learning environments affect all the senses of a learner, impacting on their emotions and in turn on cognitive functioning and behaviour (Graetz 2006). In other words, the person and their environment impact one another. The South African policy context, which advocated for CE as a student experience, implicitly fosters the opportunity for community spaces to impact on student sensibilities. However, this is seldom acknowledged from a pedagogical perspective, where the learning emphasis is traditionally placed on discipline-based knowledge (Graetz 2006).

One of the most popular pedagogical responses to creating interactive learning spaces draws on the philosophy of experiential education that was initially promoted by Dewey, and which has been subsequently elaborated on by Lewin and others (see for example Hatcher & Erasmus 2008), building on the constructivist theory of learning, which asserts that our learning evolves schematically, by building on our previous experiences (Kolb & Kolb 2005). David Kolb in particular (1984) introduced a cyclical model of action

learning whereby learning and understanding is transformed through a facilitated process of ‘concrete experience’, ‘abstract conceptualisation’, ‘reflective observation’ and ‘active experimentation’ (Kolb & Kolb 2005:194). Kolb and Kolb argue here that individuals need to experience different learning spaces so that they have the opportunity to employ each of the four processes in order to develop the capacity for learning. It is this interplay between action, reflection and reconceptualisation that has captured the pedagogical goals of proponents of CE through SL in higher education (Ash & Clayton 2004; Bender 2008; Erasmus 2005, 2011; Berman & Allen 2012; Maistry & Thakrar 2012; Petersen & Osman 2013, to name but a few). The essence of this approach is that real life experiences contribute to new learning and knowledge production in its broadest sense.

In the context of SL, it can therefore be argued that community members have an opportunity to enhance their own learning through interaction with students, by schematically building on community-based knowledge, while the students can, in turn, build on their own knowledge through interaction with the community. CE through SL traditionally focuses on the student experience of a community-based environment, and the student’s critical reflection of their learning from that experience. Less attention is paid to the nature of critical reflection and learning for community participants, or the power dynamics of such learning interactions (see for example, Mahlomaholo & Matobako 2006; Preece 2013).

### ***Service Learning***

Much has been written about SL, particularly in the South African context. The focus of this paper is on literature that specifically addresses the role of SL as a learning space, and its contribution to knowledge production as a holistic experience. Some of the key characteristics of SL in university contexts are that it is a collaborative, mutual learning relationship between students, academics and community members. Community members may be practitioners from a variety of community development contexts, ranging from NGOs who adopt a particular social focus, such as providing an advocacy service to people with disabilities, or facilitating national literacy initiatives to grass-roots activities, whereby unemployed residents in a particular location are given skills and training to run locally-managed child care facilities. Many more examples could be cited. Ideally, the SL

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relationship is developed over time, where students negotiate with community members an identified need that can be addressed during a specified timeframe, committing themselves to achieving an agreed upon outcome or contribution, after which they are required to reflect on their learning experience in relation to theory, and are assessed on that learning as part of their degree (Howard 2001). Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition of SL still forms the basis for many working definitions in South Africa:

A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher 1995:1).

The distinctive feature of SL as a pedagogical tool is that it requires a facilitated process of reflection on the CE activity by the student, in order to achieve the learning transformation advocated for by Kolb and others. In other words, the CE experience itself does not necessarily lead to new learning, unless there is a period of facilitated reflection, which enables the constructivist process of transformation to take place (Berman & Allen 2012), particularly in a way that challenges stereotyping attitudes (Ash & Clayton 2004). The experiential learning pedagogy is structured in such a way as to create an enabling environment for this to happen (Erasmus 2005). However, the capturing or facilitating of this period of reflection is rarely extended to community members themselves, in spite of their status as partners (Bender 2008). There is an assumption, therefore, that community members actively contribute to the creation of new knowledge, but that often, the community voice is missing from this loop (Alperstein 2007, Du Plessis & Van Dyk 2013). Also, seldom the practical challenges of creating the SL space seldom receive discussion (Bringle, Clayton & Price 2009; O'brien 2009; Jordaan 2012).

### ***The Service Learning Space***

While some writers have discussed different theoretical approaches to the SL pedagogy (for example Hlengwa 2010 in relation to Bernstein's discussion of

vertical and horizontal discourses), others have referred to the SL or the CE environment as a particular kind of learning ‘space’ (Maistry & Thakrar 2012; Albertyn & Daniels 2009; Gibbons 2006; Erasmus 2007; 2011). Many of these writers refer to Gibbons’ (2006:19-29) notion of the ‘agora’ as a ‘public space’ wherein a new form of ‘socially robust’ knowledge is co-constructed through real life interaction. This kind of knowledge, known as ‘Mode 2’ knowledge, crosses disciplinary boundaries and is embedded in a social context where the environment becomes a ‘trading zone’ for debate, dialogue, experimentation and construction of new meanings and understandings through transactions between multiple actors. Herein lies the pedagogical resource for academics, students and community alike, namely the environment itself and the social interaction that this entails. This more complex environment is said to reflect the ‘super-complexity’ realities of our knowledge economy, whereby universities are no longer the sole producers of knowledge (Barnett 2004). Such arguments can be evidenced more easily in large-scale partnership projects, which engage with industry, but it is not so easy to detect their value in small-scale SL projects. Equally, the power differentials between grass roots community members and university members challenge the extent to which knowledge is genuinely co-constructed (Albertyn & Daniels 2009; Bringle *et al.* 2009). Keeping the balance between community and student learning needs is a challenge. Hill *et al.* (2008), in the context of South Africa, and Stewart-Sicking *et al.* (2013:54) in the context of the United States, argue that the students themselves can often be overwhelmed by community environments, proposing that their ‘real-life’ experiences also need to be carefully managed. Ringstad *et al.* (2012:268) in a Californian context, emphasise the need for vigilance in relation to avoiding ‘excessive emphasis on student-centred pedagogical innovation over that of community transformation’. They advocate for models of SL that ‘directly engage community members’ (ibid.:271), in order to ensure that community solutions to problems are sufficiently valued. Erasmus (2007, 2011), in the context of the University of the Free State in South Africa, discusses the need for sustained CE placement sites, whereby communities can benefit from sustained interventions that, over time, contribute to empowerment of the community voice in contributing to knowledge production. She highlights how, in the impoverished community contexts of a country like South Africa, there is often the need for a triad relationship, whereby NGOs act as mediating



agencies between the community and the university (see also Kaars & Kaars 2014). The SL experience then becomes a shared ‘developmental space’ (2007:35), which addresses social concerns of empathy and understanding in the co-construction of knowledge. This argument is supported by Kruss (2012), among others, although she highlights that the quality of SL in practice is uneven.

There are now an increasing number of studies which privilege the community voice in CE and service. A rare example on the African continent outside of South Africa is a study on the nature of SL partnerships in Egypt, which focused on community-voiced evidence of learning (Shalabi 2013). However, an empirical discussion of the relationship between power dynamics, co-creation of knowledge and the opportunity for community reflection in small scale community projects is still relatively rare. The project discussed in this paper provides an analysis of how students and communities shared the community learning spaces and environments through an action research process, which included a community feedback loop that demonstrated both the potential and challenges of community learning spaces and environments as pedagogical resources.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### ***The Project Design***

The project, conducted in 2013, was the second phase of an action research project that started in 2012. The aim of the first action research project was to explore how community members and students felt about the process of establishing SL projects, and what benefits or challenges they experienced. One of the key highlighted challenges was that not all participants felt ownership over the planning process (Preece 2013). From these findings the theoretical concept of adaptive leadership emerged (Heifetz 1994), which had been discussed by Stephenson (2011) in the context of CE in the United States. The research design for the second phase applied the concept of adaptive leadership, which emphasises the need to ensure clarification of competing goals and values amongst all layers of an organisation when there is a process of intervention for change. The adaptive leadership process encourages attention to power differentials, and the nurturing of trust and respect, as features of engaging with multiple stakeholders. Adaptive

leadership is therefore an intervention strategy to motivate for change, based on consultation and dialogue and respect for a diversity of views. The facilitative leadership process of clarification and dialogue aims to foster shared ownership over decision making, particularly if the focus is on change. In the context of this second phase of the action research project as the focus of this paper, change would be a long-term aspiration that might not take place until after the SL experience, but might be reflected as changed attitudes or perspectives. The planning process for the SL projects, however, required consultative preparation between the NGOs, their community members, and the student participants, in order to ensure a better understanding of either shared or conflicting expectations for the projects and their outcomes.

The research objective of the second phase was to explore the extent to which those competing goals and values were integrated as a shared endeavour. The issue of the pedagogical contribution of learning spaces emerged as an unplanned outcome of the findings and it is this aspect on which this paper focuses.

This second phase was a partnership between the University of the Free State and University of KwaZulu-Natal. It was funded by the National Research Foundation, with additional funding support from each university. A total of 12 case studies of small scale CE projects across the two universities, involving 78 students and nine organisations, were undertaken. The University of KwaZulu-Natal undertook eight case studies, shared between the School of Social Sciences and School of Education, where 40 students, five courses and six NGOs were involved.

This paper focuses on three case studies and eight students. Codes for the case studies and the interviewed respondents are provided as follows.

Case Study One (CS1) was an NGO working on a film to assess hunger needs in Pietermaritzburg, with a view to changing perceptions of the wider populace about the hunger conditions of urban residents. The NGO recruited two SL students (S1 and S2) from a Politics and Policy Studies course. The learning environment was an urban township, and the community spaces included people's homes as well as the NGO offices based in Pietermaritzburg.

Case Study Two (CS2) involved the non-formal learning spaces of family houses or community buildings with basic amenities in a rural location, approximately an hour's drive from the university in

Pietermaritzburg. The family houses served as locations for rural reading clubs. An NGO requiring assistance with monitoring and evaluating five reading clubs involved two students from a Policy Development Master's course (S3 and S4) working with one SL student (S5) and one Master's student (S6) from an Education and Development programme. The ultimate aim for change would be to improve the quality of the reading clubs.

Finally, Case Study Three (CS3) was a learning space in a resident's garden in a peri-urban township. Two SL students (S7 and S8) from the same Education and Development programme responded to an NGO's request for assistance with facilitating a community based early childhood development programme for pre-school age children, who were too poor to attend the formal nursery. The aim was for both students and community facilitators to learn from each other, with a view to improving the crèche activities, and ultimately encouraging participation by parents.

In each case, the NGOs acted as mediating agencies in the form of a triad relationship, as advocated by Erasmus (2011). Both the reading clubs and the early childhood development project employed community-based volunteers (Reading Club Facilitators (RCFs) and Early Childhood Development Facilitators (ECDFs), respectively). The students working with the film project staff (FP1 and FP2) interviewed isiZulu-speaking residents concerning their experiences of poverty and hunger. All the students were therefore obliged to interact with NGO organisers as well as residents in impoverished communities. The practice-based learning environments and spaces were informal, and located on the 'home turf' of isiZulu-speaking residents, most of whom had received limited formal education.

The students undertook their SL placements by negotiation with the organisers for a few hours once or twice a week over a period of between six and eight weeks. Initial negotiations with NGOs took place through two members of staff from the Schools of Education and Social Sciences. In the case of the reading clubs and early childhood development programme, this was followed up by student meetings with the NGOs and community participants in order to clarify competing expectations (goals and values). The students participating in the film project met with the NGO and film organisers and students subsequently took responsibility for contacting and interacting with community interviewees. Because the reading clubs and early childhood development projects were a substantial distance from the university campus, transport was provided for the students, funded in one

case by the NGO and in the second case by the study's own research funds. Students working on the film project organised their own local transport to a central office, but travelled with the film crew for the interviews.

### ***Research Approach***

The study took a case study approach within an action research framework. Day Ashley (2012), among others, explains that case studies provide an opportunity to explore and describe a phenomenon in a bounded way, whereby the parameters of the phenomenon are clearly defined in a particular context. Case studies can be used, amongst other reasons, for the purpose of testing theory. Yin (2009:52) calls this a 'critical' case. In this study, each case was a small-scale CE activity involving SL students and designed to test the theory of adaptive leadership. Although findings of cases may not be representative, they do provide opportunities for replicability, particularly where multiple cases allow for 'cross-case comparison' (Day Ashley 2012:103). This paper analyses the responses of the students and community members across three of the case studies.

The very nature of a practice-based activity such as SL requires a research methodology that can capture experiential learning and reflective enquiry-based process of the Kolb learning cycle. Moreover, the SL and CE process requires a research strategy that enables a triangulation of perspectives and a shared ownership of the findings. The characteristics of action research lend themselves to this process of inquiry. Although there are various orientations and methodologies associated with action research (Zeelen *et al.* 2008), it generally functions as a partnership between the main actors, and follows a cyclical process of action, reflection, analysis and feedback, with a focus on 'dialogue' and 'social learning' (*ibid.*:3). Action research tends to be participatory in that the researchers and participants reflect together on the practice and its outcomes. Equally, there is a strong focus on ensuring that community voices are heard (Van der Linden & Zeelen 2008). These elements were present in our research approach, where there were two research cycles, and each phase involved open dialogue at the beginning and end of the cycle with research participants (students, academics and community members); action was taken to address the challenges of participatory planning raised in the first phase and, within the

limitations of access and time, voices from the various community layers (NGO, grass roots) were included in the findings (Stringer 2004). In addition, students from the SL courses presented their personal reflections on their learning process in class as part of their academic assessment. The more formal data collection process for the above case studies involved recording initial preparation interviews between students and community members, interim observation notes by a visiting research assistant, and follow-up interviews with key participants on completion of the case study. Interviews with community members were conducted in their first language (usually isiZulu) and translated into English by the research assistant, who had received training in interview methods. The interview questions were concerned with how people felt they had participated in the preparation process, what they felt they had learned or gained from the engagement relationship, and what challenges the engagement projects had raised.

The project proposal received ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal prior to commencement, and all participants signed letters of consent that confirmed their anonymity and confidentiality.

The recordings were transcribed verbatim and read several times. They were then thematically coded and analysed for content and patterns of responses (Chilisa & Preece 2005; Arthur *et al.* 2012). This was initially an inductive process, whereby themes emerged from several readings of the data. The deductive phase of applying the adaptive leadership theory as a lens for explaining the responses contributed to the final themes, which are discussed below. The findings that will be discussed here are drawn primarily from the formal interviews and categorised under the headings: learning spaces, knowledge sharing, power differentials and challenges of using community learning spaces.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### ***Learning Spaces***

The contribution of the learning spaces and environments to shared learning and knowledge creation was gleaned primarily from the participants' reflections on how they interacted with each other in these community spaces.

The nature of the spaces was discussed only briefly, since this had not been the original focus of the study, but unsolicited comments by students and community members, in relation to the challenges faced, gave an indication of their under-resourced nature. For instance, the reading club site manager asked for assistance with toys and books ('we are lacking in materials' [sic]) and a reading club facilitator asked for assistance with providing a proper educational venue 'because we are using my home for gatherings' (for the children's reading activities). Similarly, the parents of the early child development project asked for additional resources: 'if you could add more toys for us'; supported by requests from the SL students themselves:

Try to get many more resources because they don't have enough resources like paint brushes, paint [...] they do the same thing all the time [...]; transport as well (CS3, S7).

The film project also revealed the impoverished nature of the environment in which the students were working:

It hit me hard emotionally, I think that I put my heart too much into it. I learnt that it could be visible to society that a certain household is coping [...] but in that household, things are going wrong that nobody can see. People go days without eating, and yet they still work (CS1, S1).

These were the environmental spaces, then, in which the student and community members learned from and with each other, reflectively analysing, amongst other things, the use and acquisition of new knowledge, the power relationship between university and community, and ways in which they communicated within those relationships.

### ***Knowledge Sharing and Co-creation***

Both students and community members highlighted examples of learning from each other. The community participants, for instance, illustrated the way in which they both contributed and applied new knowledge in ways that

would not have been possible in a classroom interaction space:

If they have an opinion, they would share and I would also do the same when I had an opinion about the children [...] see they [students] are also educated – they came with the shapes and the robots [traffic light colours] [...] but this, one day they finished with shapes, and [I] proposed to teach them about robots. We told them ‘no, they shouldn’t – these children are still young, they shouldn’t learn everything at once in a day’ [...] we also learned that whenever you give a child paper, they should write their name and surname on top of the page (CS3, ECDF).

The students confirmed the benefits of learning ‘in situ’ where they could see that knowledge can also be context specific, and learned through experience. Expertise does not rest in one domain:

The experts are the people themselves ...as much as I might sit here at UKZN and learn about early childhood development and community work [...] whatever I have learned at [the community location] for example, it is not the same. The real experts of that area, of that programme, are the people that are going through that experience, so [...] whatever I have learned on paper [...] we could say we are the real experts, whereas we get there and introduce something that we think they need, [but] they might probably think that ‘no this is not for us’ ... (CS3, S1);

I gained an understanding that children don’t learn in the same way as adults and that children learn in [sic] a slow pace and that you need to be patient [...] also kids learn things better if its visual [...] and it must be [...] colourful and bright (CS3, S2).

These sentiments of mutual exchange were echoed across the three projects:

They [reading club facilitators] also picked up a few lessons from the students [...] working with other people is nice, sharing ideas, you here interacting with us, asking us questions. We love things like this, to be able to learn how we can improve our work (CS2, RCF1).

Even at NGO level, where project ownership was strongest, there were unexpected opportunities for co-learning:

The students themselves, because they sometimes suffer the same issues [...] they helped to bring also another dimension of understanding of food insecurity [...] they also took part in the discussion, they also said things which was quite interesting [...] and how there is hunger in the [university] hostels [...] it enriched the script, because originally, we weren't going to think about universities (CS1, FP1).

Although not all the research project's eight case studies produced such positive outcomes (Preece *et al.* 2014), there was a sense that the grass roots nature of these three learning spaces created new insights and opportunities. Some of these insights were revealed most poignantly in the context of how the power differential between university and community could be utilised as a learning curve for the students, but also as a motivating resource for the community members.

### ***Reflecting on Power Differentials***

In the case of both the reading club and early child development facilitators, grass-roots community workers highlighted that the very presence of the university created a sense of pride in the projects and legitimated their work as worthwhile, which in turn stimulated changes in attitude:

The reading clubs that have been visited have become more alert and motivated compared to those that the students have not visited [...] also [...] the attendance of the clubs has increased because they know students from the varsity will arrive [...] even the children have changed (CS2, RC Manager);

I also saw that I am also important [...] the children and parents saw this as a legitimate thing [...] we wish that you people could come back again, because your presence has been noted by the parents [...]



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because some parents thought this was just a game [sic]. Some even refused to allow their children to come [...] now they saw that this thing of teaching from home is serious [sic] (CS3, ECDF).

But the positive impact of this partnership required sensitive management of differentials in status and a recognition that the students' participation had to be on the community's terms. This was their terrain, and it was important that this sense of ownership was not undermined:

What I learned was the facilitators they take this job very seriously, it is kinda [sic] like it's their baby and if someone else from the outside tries to intrude somewhere [...] you are attacking [sic] them personally so [...] if you want to intervene [...] do it in a way that [...] does not seem as if you are attacking them: in a way that we are here to learn (CS3, S2);

When they [the students] arrived here they showed us love. They didn't have that attitude of treating us like strangers [...] they showed us love and we united (CS2 RCF2).

Even among the positive element of these projects, there were challenges, however, which reflected the more fluid environmental boundaries of real life terrains, where student-teacher differentials and learning spaces are not clearly drawn. On some occasions, for instance, the early child development students felt uncertain about how best to engage with this new environment:

We didn't know how to do certain things with her: how do we engage with her in doing something? Because [...] we took the plastics to her and said 'here are the plastics, what should we do?' [sic] [...] and she was like 'eish, I don't know as well' [sic] (CS3, S1).

The solution to this dilemma was articulated concisely by the community coordinator of this project:

I learned that if you are teaching each other, we have to listen to each other, and accept each other [...] the main thing is to work together

equally and in harmony [...] we worked well together, it was nice (CS3, ECD coordinator).

These community learning environments had to be approached flexibly and with tolerance for different and competing agendas:

We were able to compromise with what we were given by the film makers [...] and actually attend when they wanted us to be there and when we were working together we knew: when it was your turn, you're the one who's calling; now I'm gonna [sic] email... so everything just balanced (CS1, S2).

Perhaps the most insightful observation about the learning environment and the spaces in which community members were working came from one of the students in the early child development project:

The role they [community facilitators] play is [...] a very empowering role [...] even though they know that they have nothing at all in life, but [sic] they see that they can do something with their lives [...] the parents of the children they are teaching trust them [...] even though they know that they are not qualified teachers (CS3, S1).

This latter comment resonates with the analysis of Bickford and Wright (2006), cited at the beginning of this paper, where a 'rich' learning environment is described as a space for exchange of meaningful experiences, and a place which impacts on all senses, not just cognitive or behavioural. The above findings illustrated that the participants' experiences developed knowledge and understanding. There are, however, many challenges in relation to the logistics of planning and maintaining such learning spaces.

### ***Challenges of Using Community Spaces and Environments***

The process of negotiating participation by the six NGOs, and placing the 40 participating students across eight case studies, was coordinated by the two research project academic staff members. These negotiations took place over a period of four months prior to the student placements. They entailed efforts

to deal with the competing goals and purposes of the different players over such things as academic coursework requirements, university timetables, the NGO management goals, and community expectations. With the exception of one case study, where the class lecturer took responsibility for preparatory negotiations, each case study required several visits to and from the organisation, involving one or both of the research project academics and NGO staff. Although student research assistants were employed to collect data, the responsibility for addressing any subsequent communication and timetable crises rested with the academics and their NGO contacts. While the three case studies discussed in this paper recorded positive experiences, there were occasional transport challenges and problems with trying to communicate at a distance through unreliable cellphone networks. Furthermore, not all the student learning spaces were seen in advance by the academics.

There were thus risks in placing students into spaces which had fluid boundaries, and which involved unstructured interactions with a wide range of actors. The coordination process was time consuming. In particular, communications which crossed several layers of participation often widened opportunities for miscommunication, and placed a heavy reliance on students to take responsibility for their own time management. This emphasis on student responsibility could sometimes be beneficial for personal growth. As one student from one of the other case studies said: ‘if I’m late, for myself [its] OK; but then if I’m late and someone else is waiting for me it’s a ‘big deal’ [sic] and it’s not okay’. However, some expressed concern that there had been insufficient opportunity for feedback, noting ‘we are not a hundred percent sure about how you viewed our work and we would like feedback on the work we do’ (CS2 RCF3). In some of the case studies not discussed in this paper, there was also evidence that interim, formalised feedback sessions between the different members may have helped to avoid misunderstandings or to re-clarify competing goals and purposes (Preece *et al.* 2014).

Finally, the time-limited nature of the service-learning approach to CE posed sustainability issues. A number of people reflected that there was insufficient time for the community to benefit substantially from the relationship:

The sad part is that this programme is for six weeks only [...] I see it as something that I wish to be constantly there. If a certain

programme starts, the university must be available (CS2 RC Manager).

It was a nice experience. It's just that it ended very quick [sic] when we still had a lot of ideas (CS3 S1).

## **Conclusions**

There are three main issues that pertain to the pedagogical contribution of community spaces and environments. Firstly, the impoverished nature of the learning spaces created a need to focus on human relationships as a learning resource. Secondly, the environments became the pedagogical spaces for different forms of learning, which relied on the adaptive leadership principles of respect and dialogue. Thirdly, the knowledge acquired was not simply new skills or information, but included knowledge about relationships, and the enhancement of self-awareness. There was a realisation among both community and student participants that each had something to both contribute, as well as to learn from working together. Both community members and students – but especially community members – highlighted the contribution of dialogue as a learning resource within their community spaces, thus providing community members in particular with a means of being heard.

There were also indications that this community-based pedagogical relationship did engender change in terms of new attitudes (for example through parents' enhanced attitudes towards the reading clubs and crèche activities), but also among the students in terms of recognising that knowledge is not exclusively embedded in the academic environment.

This study therefore demonstrated that structured CE in community spaces as an 'agora' can provide opportunities for mutual learning that contributed to the co-construction of 'socially robust knowledge' (Gibbons 2006). This form of knowledge construction engages many learning senses. However, although the SL programme requires a formal process of student reflection, in order to maximise the mutual benefits of such learning environments, there is a necessity for a built-in feedback loop, whereby all the participating layers (academic, NGO, grass roots) are invited to reflect and comment. While the action research methodology facilitated such a

process for this study, it is not a standard feature of SL in the university. The larger study (Preece *et al.* 2014) revealed that communication between the different participants is necessary throughout the engagement process, and that without the follow up reflection process, misunderstandings can remain unresolved.

Although community spaces are a rich learning resource, therefore, such open learning environments necessitate careful management, and require the opportunity for structured feedback sessions, both during and after completion of the project placements. Also, for proper preparation of all participants, one of the pedagogic challenges for SL ought to be taking cognisance of the fact that the ownership of knowledge creation is not confined to academia, and opportunities must be built into the CE relationship for shared ownership over the learning that takes place in a public space. It was however evident that if power differentials between grass roots communities and university members are managed sensitively, this can be utilised in the learning space to motivate all participants and to lend credibility at grass roots level. The pedagogic challenge in this latter respect is to ensure that students respect the community space as a site for mutual forms of learning.

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