‘Most importantly, it’s like the partner takes more interest in us’: Using *Ubuntu* as a Fundamental Ethic of Community Engagement (CE) Partnerships at Rhodes University

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Abstract

Community engagement (CE) has been noted as an important means of enhancing students’ experiences in undergraduate programmes, because this promotes interdisciplinary conversations. In addition, it has the potential to challenge the colonial forms of disciplinary knowledge that have dominated thus far, and may play an important role as we seek to Africanise the curriculum. The Early Childhood Development (ECD) Residence Programme is a CE programme at Rhodes University, where community partners from ECD centres engage with student volunteers, over a period of one year. Such programmes are co-managed between the Rhodes University CE (RUCE) Division and community partners, as well as between community partners and student volunteers from a variety of programmes of study. This, it is hoped, translates into the building of mutually beneficial relationships. However, what do these relationships actually mean for the students and partners, and what are their benefits and challenges?

Using the ECD Residence Programme as a case study, this paper argues that CE at Rhodes University is centred on the ethics of *Ubuntu*. Findings from an initial round of interviews and a focus group illustrate that the community partners and student volunteers build long-term, meaningful, and mutually beneficial relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of the CE activities in which they are involved. These relationships are based on

Print ISSN 1023-1757; Electronic ISSN: 2519-5476; DOI https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2019/sp27a4

values that include communication, respect, love, and care. This paper illustrates how mutually beneficial relationships are key to building and sustaining successful CE partnerships. We further note the potential for *Ubuntu* in CE to be transformative.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, community engagement partnerships, transformative learning, interdisciplinary conversations

Introduction

Recognising that higher education institutions (HEIs) play a central intellectual role and are an important economic resource to their communities, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of HEIs investing in community building (Gugerty & Swezey 1996). Therefore, in South Africa, the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education Transformation promoted the inclusion of community engagement (CE) in HEIs' agendas (Bengu 1997). This has led to HEIs moving away from being 'ivory towers' and becoming more socially responsive and involved in their communities; nevertheless, it is recognised that HEIs exist to provide a rich learning environment for students, as well as opportunities to contribute to community development (Gugerty & Swezey 1996). Further to this, in South Africa, particularly at Rhodes University (RU), there has been a shift from seeing CE as the third pillar alongside the teaching/learning nexus and research, to being integrated into both teaching and learning, and research (Preece 2013). D. Hornby (personal communication, January 5, 2016) notes that the long-term aim has been to fully infuse CE across the university, embedding it institutionally.

CE at RU spans the breadth of what is termed the CE continuum, including volunteerism, service-learning, and engaged research. CE can be defined as the process of using teaching, learning, and research to build and exchange knowledge, skills, resources, and expertise, in 'mutually beneficial relationships with communities' (Petersen & Osman 2013:4). It is typically expressed in a variety of forms, ranging from credit-bearing service-learning academic programmes to non-credit-bearing volunteer activities. Volunteerism involves students engaging in communities in activities that are of a social and educational nature. An integrated model, with student volunteers from many undergraduate curricula (e.g. on the Engaged Citizen Programme and

Residence Programme), provides great potential for CE to enhance interdisciplinarity (Albertyn & Daniels 2009), as well as the possibility for transformation in students' learning experiences. In addition, given that CE is embedded in local 'real-life' contexts, it has the potential to challenge the colonial theories and forms of disciplinary knowledge that have dominated HEIs thus far. Furthermore, it may play an important role as we seek to Africanise the curriculum (Akhurst, Solomon, Mitchell & van der Riet 2016).

Service-learning, as a form of CE, combines academic studies with service in communities. Mitchell (2008) distinguishes traditional service-learning from a more 'critical' approach that explicitly aims toward greater social justice. Traditional approaches to service-learning risk reinforcing existing hierarchies and may be criticised for being paternalistic, simply prompted by charity where students 'do service for disadvantaged people' (Parker-Gwin & Mabry 1998:278). Mitchell (2008) proposes that a critical approach is characterised by three aspects: explicit work to redistribute power amongst participants; developing authentic relationships in both university and community settings (re-imagining the roles of partners); and working to both conscientise (Freire 1970) students to the impact of inequalities and aim for social change.

CE can be defined as a process of bringing together different and often multiple stakeholders to build relationships in collaborative ways, with the ultimate goal of improving the collective well-being of all (Maurrasse 2010). According to Mintz and Hesser (1996), there are four critical elements that lend themselves to thoughtful CE. Firstly, orientation and training are important first steps in CE for both community partners and students. It is important to provide sufficient information from the onset about the terms of engagement. Secondly, it is important to incorporate community voices, essential in building bridges, making change, problem-solving, and to combat exploitation or differing expectations. Thirdly, there needs to be meaningful action in all CE activities; all engagement needs to be necessary and of value to both the community partner and the students. Lastly, reflection is a crucial component of the pedagogy of CE, as it places the students' experiential learning into a broader context; it also enables links to be made between experiences of practice and academic theories, thus enhancing praxis (Gilbert & Sliep 2009).

The principles of CE at RU include working from a strategic model of engagement, which means recognising the capabilities and skills of 'others'

and allowing them to invest in what they have. This entails working from an asset-based approach to community development (Cox & Seifer 2005), which recognises that all people have knowledge, skills, and capabilities. Within strategic models of engagement, mutually beneficial partnerships, benefitting both community partners and students, are proposed (Gugerty & Swezey 1996).

Joint learning is also an important principle, encompassing an approach to joint planning, joint action, and joint reflection of all CE activities. A co-management model of programmes is promoted as a partnership model. Not only does the Rhodes University CE (RUCE) Division appoint a coordinator to oversee a volunteer programme, it also encourages all community partners to appoint volunteer managers in their organisations. Volunteer managers are in charge of overseeing student volunteers at their organisations, and they run any additional organisation-specific training that they believe is important for the student volunteers.

This research investigates partner relationships within the context of CE at RU. Many international studies on partner relationships have only been at the level of single case studies (Cox & Seifer 2005). Therefore, it has been important to carry out this research since there is limited knowledge, particularly in the South African context, about the features of partnerships as well as processes that need to be followed in not only starting new partnerships but also sustaining them. In addition, historical factors in South Africa might further complicate developing more equal partnerships (Netshandama 2010). There is a need for community partners to be actively involved in construction, delivery, and learning outcomes (Hart & Akhurst 2016).

The 'voices' of community partners have not been adequately incorporated into university partnerships, and research done has largely been from the perspectives of students (Akhurst 2016). In trying to work in a participatory way towards greater equality (Mitchell 2008), the roles of community partners in CE activities need to be reimagined for the systems of power to be deconstructed. This research investigates features of partnerships across different partner relationships between RU and community partners, drawing on student volunteer and community partner perspectives. In addition, from the data collected, we illustrate what students learn from each other, what they learn from partners, as well as what partners learn from students and from other partners, towards more transformative learning (Mezirow 1997).

This research also hopes to illustrate that, through CE, democratic spaces of learning are created (Bazana 2019). Community partner voices are

valued, opening up 'to different bodies and traditions of knowledge and knowledge-making in new and exploratory ways', this is towards a more decolonised education (Heleta 2016:2). This process is two-fold, consisting of the epistemic project and the personal project, as hegemonic Eurocentric views about knowledge have resulted in a creation of 'a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people' (Grosfoguel 2007: 214).

While the epistemic project is about knowledge creation and the valuing of all knowledge, the personal project is a rehumanising approach that allows students, and in the case of this research, community partners, to claim their spaces equally in being part of shaping knowledge. This research demonstrates that, through foregrounding student and community knowledge and agency, strides are made to reduce injustices in knowledge production (Heleta 2016). This, Letsekha (2013:14) argues, can make HEIs 'relevant to the material, historical and social realities of the communities in which universities operate'. There is thus a valuing of different lived realities (Grant, Quinn & Vorster 2018).

Partnerships in CE

One of the strengths of CE is that it brings together people who have varied experiences, who aim to collectively generate questions and seek solutions, through having shared common ground (Fitzgerald, Allen & Roberts 2010). HEIs partner with local communities to jointly improve their access to resources and opportunities (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker & Donohue 2003). Good partnerships have the potential to impact people's daily lives through making deep community change (Pasque 2010). Partnerships between HEIs and local communities benefit a variety of stakeholder groups. Communities benefit through building their capacities and students benefit through learning in transformative ways and developing their values in relation to social justice issues (Community Partner Summit Group 2010).

HEIs should collaborate with their local communities in mutually beneficial ways, for the purpose of exchanging resources and knowledge (Bringle & Hatcher 2010). In order for such collaborations to be successful, they need to be built on solid working foundations over time (Strand *et al.* 2003). In building an effective community partnership, it is important for all parties to respect the dignity and self-worth of others and be able to find

common ground. There needs to be a commitment to the principle of doing no harm and an understanding of the power dynamics that maintain oppression and injustice (Gugerty & Swezey 1996). In addition, community capacity-building and social justice need to be explicit goals in partnerships (Community Partner Summit Group 2010).

Working from a social justice approach, HEIs partner with communities that have been previously disadvantaged and marginalised, with access to fewer opportunities and resources; HEIs and communities work in partnership to collaboratively improve such access (Strand *et al.* 2003). For change to take place, partnerships need to not only be sustained, but also institutionalised; this is important for continuity (Community Partner Summit Group 2010). Efforts at social change in a partnership will only succeed if issues of power and diversity are directly addressed, not only within the partnership but within the communities (Pasque 2010).

Collaboration can be defined as creating a shared vision and working together towards a common goal through sharing roles and responsibilities, power, and accountability, thereby building a mutually beneficial relationship (Mintz & Hesser 1996). It is important to note that partnerships have complex dynamics, which are similar to those of interpersonal relationships (Pasque 2010). In a collaborative relationship, all partners bring different expectations; these need to be acknowledged and negotiated at the outset. Importantly, all partners also bring assets, in the form of certain skills and knowledge. In order for expectations and assets to be balanced, when trying to establish a mutually beneficial relationship, power needs to be distributed as equally as possible in the partnership.

For genuine collaboration to occur, partners need to develop an environment of trust, where there is a shared goal and shared responsibilities and authority. To achieve this, explicit discussion of these issues is needed. There also needs to be regular engagement and exchanges of information, sharing resources, and alternating activities while enhancing one another's capacities. This results in a relationship that is both inclusive and reciprocal (Mintz & Hesser 1996). For genuine partnerships to exist in an integrative manner, there needs to be room created for multiple voices and for the perspectives of all members of the partnership to emerge. Pasque (2010) suggests that this should take place in multiple venues, including community settings and HEI spaces.

Successful collaborative relationships are built over time, on the foun-

dation of a working relationship (Strand *et al.* 2003). For partnerships to work, they need to be 'developed and implemented in a way that is transparent, equitable, sustainable, and accountable to both community and academic partners' (Community Partner Summit Group 2010:208). If decision-making in partnerships is unilateral, and there is inequitable distribution of power, resources, and a lack of commitment, the partnership will not work (Community Partner Summit Group 2010).

Seifer (2010:199) states that, from an HEI perspective, 'communities can and should be hubs for discovering new knowledge, generating and testing theories, translating research into action, and sharing innovations'. This means that spaces existing outside of what are considered formal academic settings should not only be embraced, but also supported as intellectual spaces. Communities need to be at the centre of engagement and learning, in order to achieve social justice and effective partnerships, and build community capacity.

Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010) propose four key concepts that should underpin an HEI's approach to community partnership development. The first is community embeddedness. Second, it is important to propose asset-based solutions. This means building on the strengths and assets of community partners. Third, due attention needs to be given to building community capacity. Capacity-building requires community partners to be involved in developing community programmes. Lastly, it is important to partner with collaborative networks that are sustainable.

Ubuntu as an Ethic

This paper proposes that principles of CE partnerships at RU are linked to ethics of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu*, deriving from the Nguni (Bantu) languages of Southern Africa (Mawere & Mabuya 2016), is a social ethic and a people-centred philosophy (Venter 2004). This philosophy is about the building of positive human relationships and developing with others. It is premised on the idea that human beings are united (Venter 2004). Thus, *Ubuntu* can be seen as a goal and a guide for humanity (Mawere & Mabuya 2016).

According to Venter (2004), *Ubuntu* is a philosophy which seeks to promote a society's common good. It is an essential element of human growth, which includes humanness (Venter 2004), and is at the centre of all human existence (Mawere & Mabuya 2016). Based upon this philosophy, individuals

are seen as existing cooperatively, since they are regarded as interconnected within society. This is not to say that individuality is negated, but it should not take precedence over the community (Mawere & Mabuya 2016). Le Roux (2000:43) writes that characteristics of a person who displays *Ubuntu* include being 'caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, socially mature, socially sensitive, virtuous and blessed'. One is not born with these qualities but acquires them through socialisation (Kamwangamalu 1999).

Mawere and Mabuya (2016:98) write that '*Ubuntu* aims at building the community as well as bonding people in a network of reciprocal relationships'. This is particularly of relevance to CE at RU, as one of the principles is that of reciprocity and building mutually beneficial relationships. Gade (2012:54) adds that '*Ubuntu* is borne [sic] out of the philosophy that community strength comes of community support, and that dignity and identity are achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity and community commitment'. This speaks to the idea that ways of knowing are conceptualised as circular, organic, and collectivist.

Whilst *Ubuntu* has been promoted in a positive light as outlined above, it has also faced many criticisms. One of these is that it could potentially open up a space of cultural conformism, propaganda reproduction, and control. However, we argue that an *Ubuntu* approach might provide a space for cross-cultural understanding to develop (Gade 2012), particularly within the context of CE. However, we are alert to the 'caution against the misappropriation of *Ubuntu* for ideological purposes that emphasise conformism and hence exclusion' (Gade 2012:53).

While many writers agree on what *Ubuntu* as an ethic means, Gade (2012) writes that this dynamic term has taken new meanings in different points in history. Mawere and Mabuya (2016) argue though that, while many variations may exist within different African cultures and languages, the conceptualisation retains the same core meaning. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, we see *Ubuntu* as encompassing partnership, relationship-building, growth and development, and joint learning and mutuality. These largely overlap with one another. Tutu (1999:31) writes that 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share'; thus, this understanding of *Ubuntu* could serve as a fundamental ethic of CE at RU. *Ubuntu* has the potential to provide a framework for respectful engagement, which entails reciprocity and community connectedness (Gade 2012).

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) Residence Programme

This research focuses on a volunteer programme at RU termed the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Residence Programme. The primary aim of the programme is to work in a strategic and coordinated way in ECD in Makhanda (previously known as Grahamstown). The programme was piloted in 2016 and encompasses two concurrent processes. These are *Siyakhana@Makana* (S@M) and the Reading Programme. At the time of undertaking this research, 15 community partners were part of the ECD programme, and each was partnered with a different RU hall of residence.

S@M has a 19-week project planning cycle. At the beginning of the year, partners set up to a maximum of three goals that they want to achieve in their organisation for the year. The emphasis is on driving the partners' agendas. During the S@M process, community partners work closely with students to jointly plan tasks that they will need to do in order to achieve the set goal(s); community partners and students then jointly execute these tasks and jointly reflect throughout the process. The 19-week period ends with a joint evaluation and celebration of goals that have been achieved.

At the time of conducting this research, as part of the Reading Programme, students conducted reading and literacy enrichment activities at ECD centres. They were trained by Community Psychology Honours students in using the Wordworks (2019) *Every Word Counts* programme.

The Research Question

The question that this research sought to answer is: what are the students' as well as the partners' experiences of building and managing partner relationships (the co-management of CE activities)? Further sub-questions were: how do students and partners experience jointly planning, executing, and reflecting on CE activities, in which they are involved together? What are the emerging insights and issues over time? How did they report on their learning? The main aim of the research questions is not necessarily to inform changes in practice over time, but rather to provide a space to reflect on these practices.

Research Design and Methodology

This research took a reflective multiple case study approach within a social

constructivist framework, since this provides an opportunity to explore the developing community partnerships in this specific context, as they have evolved over time (Preece & Manicom 2015). This approach was chosen, as opposed to action research, since it was envisioned that, through reflection, this research might inform action, but not encompass it, using the social action model of community psychology to ensure the participation of all research participants. The social action model aims to generate participation and community responsibility (Ahmed & Pretorius-Heuchert 2001), with the aim of bringing about change through mobilising community members (Visser 2012). The data collection was qualitative in nature, aiming to provide answers to questions by exploring a variety of social settings and the individuals within these (Berg 2007). In qualitative research, the aim is not to generalise findings, but instead to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of these partner relationships.

The social constructivist paradigm in which the research is located recognises that individuals make subjective meanings of their experiences. The goal of research is to explore participants' subjective understanding of situations, and how these are negotiated socially and historically. Research questions were thus broad, enabling participants to construct meaning about situations. As the researchers, we recognise that the interpretation of the research findings is shaped by our personal experiences (Creswell 2007).

The choice of which of the partnerships to focus on was made strategically to try to maximise differences and to generate possible answers to the research questions (Bryman 2012). Sampling was purposive in nature, a non-probability form of sampling. Selected partners met certain criteria, to try to establish the different perspectives of the following two categories: Firstly, some partners joined the ECD Residence Programme from its inception, whilst others joined afterwards. A selection from these two groups aimed to establish whether there might be different perspectives, since they would have had different experiences of the programme as it developed over time. Secondly, some partners self-reported or had done noticeably well in their partner relationships in previous years, whereas others self-reported or had struggled somewhat in developing their partner relationships.

The community partners who are part of the ECD Residence Programme are typically black, middle-aged women. The majority of them have a matric qualification, with some also having completed a post-matric qualification in ECD. They are all residents in the various townships of

Makhanda. Typically, both male and female students are part of this programme. They are in their second or third year of undergraduate study at RU and come from varied socio-economic backgrounds. This programme allows students to have contact with community partners and access to local knowledge in ways they would not normally have.

Since this research was exploratory in orientation, in-depth interviews (both one-on-one and focus groups) were used as a means of collecting information, to allow interviewees to talk about a broad range of issues related to their partner relationships (Boyce & Neale 2006). Findings presented in this paper are from an initial round of interviews and joint focus group discussion conducted with student volunteers and volunteer managers, respectively. Follow-up interviews and a focus group discussion then occurred after a period of six months had elapsed, to enhance reflection over time. This paper, however, draws only on the initial interviews and first focus group discussion.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data, to identify and report themes that occurred in the data (Braun & Clark 2006). This process 'interprets various aspects of the research topic' (Braun & Clark 2006:79). The six steps described by Braun and Clark (2006) were followed. A summary of these are 'familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report' (Braun & Clark 2006:87).

This research adheres to ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity (Neuman 1997). It was granted ethical approval by the relevant institutional ethics committee (PSY2017/52).

Findings and Discussion

Themes linked to *Ubuntu* that are evident in these research findings are: partnership and relationship-building, and growth and development (which encompass joint learning and mutuality). Excerpts below are direct quotations from interviews and a joint focus group discussion conducted with student volunteers (CE 1, CE 2, CE 3, and CE 4) and community partners (CP 1, CP 2, CP 3, and CP4).

Partnership and Relationship-building

D. Hornby (personal communication, February 4, 2019) states that CE at RU

is transformative, with its main aim being to redress inequalities. Both students and community partners who participate in CE activities recognise this. This can be seen in the following quotes:

> *… so when I got here, I saw the situation, like ya Grahamstown, there's like a huge division of Grahamstown and … of the Grahamstown community and the Rhodes community, so I saw that division and I saw that there is CE … so I found out, oh ok, at least as students, a student can make a difference …* (CE 2)

> *Uhm, so community itself is very important to me and I think it's even more important in the Grahamstown sense, uhm, because they speak of Grahamstown East, Grahamstown West, and that conversation itself, as much as people make the best out of it, is also a problematic conversation in itself. The fact that Grahamstown is segregated, and I think got me personally … [as] … CE rep is bridging that gap, uhm, you know?* (CE 4)

The two quotes above from student volunteers resonate with Mitchell's (2008:51) ideas of students who 'see themselves as agents of social change and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities'. The students demonstrate that they are aware of the very visible inequalities that exist in Makhanda and see CE, and themselves as student volunteers, as important ways of addressing these.

Both student volunteers and community partners recognise that in order to facilitate change within communities, a partnership needs to be established. Work cannot be done in isolation. Most importantly, these partnerships are seen as being between equals, where resources and power are jointly shared. This is explored in the following quotes:

> *… it's also building us on even partnership. Say you can't work alone, you have to work like together into bringing a difference into Grahamstown community.* (CE 2)

> *Together we are partners. We meet each other halfway. It's a 50/50 partnership*. (CP 1)

Additionally, partnership is seen as collaboration:

> *… we are in a partnership here, not that they get into the gate to do something for me or that they are here for me to do something for them; we are doing this together …* (CP 2)

> *It's an ongoing thing … even when you're not there, it will still, like, that person has the skill of doing something and you also gained a new skill in doing something.* (CE 2)

The above pairs of excerpts, each from both a partner and a student, illustrate a recognition of mutuality and that each contributes to and learns from the other. A partnership model emerges when communities and HEIs seek to intentionally develop one another by joining resources in order to meet each other's needs, paying attention to both partners' assets and needs. A collaborative model means that partners become interdependent in meaningful ways and agree on a common agenda to address relevant social issues. What is distinctive in this model is that the HEI becomes a valuable contributor to the community development process, through having a sustained presence in the community (Gugerty & Swezey 1996).

Community partners participate fully in the engagement process and have a say in the design, implementation, and evaluation of CE programmes (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2010). As collaborative partnerships develop, the sharing of resources occurs (Gugerty & Swezey 1996). Both student volunteers and community partners recognise this, as can be illustrated in the quotes below:

> *… it was just a partnership … rather than sitting here and having this great idea: 'Hey guys, do you think we should do this for the library?', and we go there and realise that they actually don't need that. So the first step would be finding what the partner in these spaces would love for us to do for them and then what they can do for us* (CE 4).

> *… we need to sit down with the volunteers and talk about how we are going to work together. Then, therefore, it will depend on how we choose to work together and that is my point of departure. I'm not instructing, but we are supposed to work together* (CP 1).

Linked to partnership is relationship-building, the basis of a successful partnership. Relationship-building is an important ethic in *Ubuntu*, since

Ubuntu is premised on the idea that human beings are united (Venter 2004). An example is:

> *… the partner understands us and I think most importantly, it's like the partner takes more interest in us … the partner is more interested in the people that she is working with more than us being there to help out with whatever goals that they have ... and I think it's safe to say that the partner takes a role of being a mother and she's constantly checking up on us, even though it's not related to CE things, but just to make sure that the relationship is maintained, so that its easier for us to actually communicate with her …* (CE 1).

As can be seen in this quote, students see themselves as belonging in the Makhanda community and start to identify their community partners as role models and parental figures. The 'authentic' (Mitchell 2008) nature of the relationships are illustrated here. This is noteworthy because in South Africa, as in other countries on the continent, people are taught from a young age that an older person who is in the same age group as their parents is their mother or father. Calling them by their names is strongly discouraged and is considered disrespectful. Similarly, one can refer to females or males who are not necessarily siblings as sisters or brothers (Kamwangamalu 1999). *Ubuntu* thus links individuals to the collective through 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood' (Gade 2012). This Afrocentric viewpoint thus views people from a collective perspective (Venter 2004).

Growth and Development (Encompassing Joint Learning and Mutuality)

Blankenberg (1999:46) writes that '[p]articipation is essential for human development, for what your neighbour has to offer in terms of experiences, knowledge and ideas is essential to your own growth'. This speaks to the idea that community partners bring with them experience and knowledge, which they share, not only with their students but with other community partners, for collective good. Thus, *Ubuntu* is about promoting the common good of society (Venter 2004).

Relationships contribute to the growth and development of participating individuals; this encompasses joint learning and mutuality. This

can be seen in the following:

> *… it's not just about myself, there are other people who play a role in my growth. So, volunteering has helped me in that sense, that I know that there are other factors that play a part in my growth … it's not just about, uhm, giving back to the community, but also you get to learn and benefit as a student, just as the partners are benefiting from your involvement in the CE* (CE 3).

Student volunteers learn from community partners and experience the reciprocity of giving and receiving. They recognise that they are part of a community that they learn from. Community partners recognise this, and see themselves as teachers in community development, as noted below, where teaching and learning are noted by both partners and students:

> *… this is not about students coming to assist us. They are here to get experience and we are here to teach them about our experience, so we work together …. I teach them that this is how we do things here, then they follow what I am saying …* (CP 2).

> *… it's not only about giving up your time; it's more than that. You can actually learn something from that; you can actually give something as you learn …* (CE 1).

> *… I learn something new every time when there is, like, a thing happening, and going somewhere, meeting the partners. Every time, I'm learning and gaining something* (CE 2).

> *At the same time, they also learn from us, I also learn from them* (CP 1).

HEIs need to view themselves as being *in* the community, in order to understand that they need to work *with* community partners to address issues of mutual concern in a collaborative manner (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2010). Developing effective community partnerships means that HEIs need to realise that they have to work *with*, as opposed to work *for*, individuals and communities, thus also mitigating the risks of patronising community partners (Gugerty & Swezey 1996).

In this kind of partnership and relationship, all knowledge is recognised as valid, and each person is seen as an equal contributor:

> *So, if now we having a partnership with the – like, understanding partnership, every time you, you gain something, the person gains something. It's an ongoing thing that doesn't, like, even when you are not there, it will still, like, that person has the skill of doing something and you also gained a new skill in doing something* (CE 2).

The belief that both HEIs and communities have something to share is a prerequisite for reciprocal relationship-building. Both parties need to believe that they are equal and that both contribute and gain. In this study, community partners recognised that they have assets that they can share with other community partners who are part of their community, and have developed the confidence to speak out:

> *At first, when I started, it was not easy, because it is not easy to stand in front of people, you see? Then there was this time I was presenting. There is this lady … she taught me how to stand in front of people; then here I am today, I – I am able to stand in front of people and say anything…* (CP 2).

Community partners not only start to recognise, but they also value the assets that each of them bring, and they start to share these. Thus, the emphasis shifts from a relationship only entailing 'student volunteer and community partner', to one of further community collaboration, illustrating interdependence as an aspect of *Ubuntu* (Venter 2004). People are thus seen as interconnected (Gade 2012). *Ubuntu* is premised on the idea of formation of relationships (Venter 2004), thus reinforcing unity and solidarity over individual self-reliance (Mawere & Mabuya 2016).

Conclusion

Going back to the research question, we can thus conclude, based on these presented findings, that students and partners recognise the value of partnership, working together, and learning from one another. Community partners during this research were given an opportunity to reflect on their role

in CE, and through this, began to recognise that they are teachers in CE. They recognised that students not only have knowledge and skills, but that students also learn at their organisations. In turn, students in this study began to value the knowledge that community partners have and respect this.

Community partners aimed to build solid relationships with students that are sustained over a period of time and go beyond the period of engagement in CE activities. In turn, students value the kind of relationship that they have with their community partners and begin to see community partners as family, often referring to them as parental figures or siblings, from whom they feel comfortable in seeking advice. Whilst the literature highlights the potential for differences in power and positioning to complicate partnership-building (e.g. Mitchell 2008), this was not evident in these initial findings. Perhaps the preparatory work and training assisted these aspects. However, these elements may also be difficult to recognise by those of us too 'close' to the work, or perhaps any discomforting responses are difficult to articulate. We therefore need to be alert to subtle references to these challenges in the later round of data collection.

A limitation of this research is that many of the responses are quite positive, which may not be a full reflection of relationship-building in CE. CE can be quite messy, and contestations may exist in the partner relationships. In being critical as the researchers, it will be important to probe more in the follow-up interviews and focus group discussions, on what these could be.

With reference to the critical approach to CE, it is clear that some of the elements mentioned by Mitchell (2008) are evident in the findings: work is done in S@M to redistribute power between partners and students, leading to more authentic relationships in the community settings. However, the extent of generalising of this power in the HEI is not evident. The students and partners each reported learning that goes beyond the programme; however, it is too early to measure whether any social change resulted. We are aware that RUCE is a relatively unique unit in the South African HEI landscape, illustrating the RU investment in such activities. This would encourage other universities to invest more in similar CE activities (rather than at times merely giving lip-service to CE, as noted in Akhurst *et al.* 2016), given their potential to enhance and transform students' learning.

Thus, based on the findings and discussion above, one could argue that *Ubuntu* is the basic ethic underlying CE activities at RU, as both students and partners realise that they are interconnected and are on a journey of not only

bettering society together, which is the overarching aim of CE, but of learning and growing together. This is also linked to the potential of these interactions to be transformative (Mezirow 1997); however, we recognise that all the elements of fully transformative experiences are not yet evident. We hope to gather further information about students' assumptions and beliefs that may have been challenged, as well as ways in which they consciously made and implemented plans towards new ways of making meaning in their worlds.

The support for *Ubuntu* as an ethic of engagement is also a key proposal of Mkabela (2015), who sees it as a valuable foundation for the decolonisation of knowledge. Mkabela (2015) also sees it as a positive value underpinning the development of more indigenous knowledge systems, and thus better suited to our South African context. CE has the potential to decolonise hegemonic Eurocentric ways of knowing through the acknowledgment of different stories that shape African realities, thereby affirming knowledge that comes from Africa (Oyedemi 2018). Partners can claim that their expertise and local knowledge, and their expertise and standing in the Makhanda community, is valued by students.

To conclude, Jarosz and Johnson-Bogart (1996:83) write that Lilla Watson, an aboriginal leader, is often quoted as having said: 'If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together'. We conclude with this quote, as we believe it begins to capture the principles of CE that we hope to promote at RU.

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