

The Porous University: Re-thinking Community Engagement

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Abstract

This primary goal of this concept paper is to stimulate a conceptual re-think around the nature of community engagement in higher education. The paper outlines the evolution of community engagement. It questions some of the ideological rhetoric of this term whereby the university is presented as a collaborative partner and co-creator of knowledge, particularly through strategies such as service-learning. It highlights issues of power relationships, ownership of the engagement process and knowledge generation. The paper offers a theoretical framework for community engagement, drawing on the capabilities approach, asset-based community development and dialogue. The framework is then presented as a diagram which can be used as an evaluative tool for assessing how metaphorically porous university boundaries are to facilitate a more mutually accessible relationship between community and university. In this way, the engagement relationship can build on community assets, rather than following a deficit model of intervention which is premised on community need.

Key words: community engagement; knowledge; capabilities approach

Introduction

The notion of university community engagement (CE) has been the subject of a conceptual re-think, particularly over the past 15 years or so. Its origins lie in the tradition of many university cultures which share three missions – teaching, research and service.

Since the 1990s universities have become increasingly marketised, following business models of managerialism. The focus is on income generation and productivity in the form of publications and research output. Courses are sold on a mass scale and universities compete fiercely with each other to achieve high rankings in the global market place. The third mission is not a criterion for assessing such rankings. Yet, in the context of this notion of the university as a private good that must be paid for, there is an ongoing resistant discourse which argues that universities have a social responsibility to contribute to the public good. The public good nature of universities, on the one hand, means that the benefits of university education accrue to more than just the individual who is able to access that education. A university graduate is expected to be more committed to engaging in citizenship responsibilities and national development than someone who has not been to university (Howard 2014). On the other hand, it can be argued that the public good role of universities extends beyond the students they admit to their degree programmes by acting as an agent of community development through relevant research, teaching and ‘service’.

Academics in African universities are often strongly committed to addressing issues of hunger, disease, poverty, crime and racial divisions that ravage the continent. In South Africa this pursuit of social responsibility was especially evident during the apartheid years prior to the election of the country’s first democratic government in 1994. Universities played a major role in challenging the injustices of the national party, its racial settlement patterns and inequities of housing, education and health services. Seepe (2004: 27) for instance, argues that the African university’s pursuit of truth must be ‘imbued with a sense of social responsibility’.

The global ideology of what form of community service is appropriate for universities has changed. Now there is less emphasis on individual philanthropy to and more emphasis on embedded institutional response to addressing community needs. So, while the discourse of the market dominates how universities are managed, the discourse of ‘service’ in institutional strategic plans and other policy documents has shifted to ‘engagement’. The shift in terminology reflects an endeavour to move away from deficit-focused models of communities in need whereby universities contribute their expertise for community benefit. The new ideology is that universities should work in partnership with communities as a collaborative effort for mutual gain.

Schuetze (2010: 25), for instance, in the context of North America, states that CE should be understood as:

... the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

Communities in these contexts are understood as organisations with shared interests, but also as a geographical space. In the South African context Hall (2010: 25) describes CE as a:

Process of creating a shared vision among the community (especially disadvantaged) and partners (local, provincial, national government, NGOs, higher education institutions, business, donors) in society, as equal partners, that results in a long term collaborative programme of action with outcomes that benefit the whole community equitably.

Types of community partnerships in both these definitions may include government and other public bodies as well as private, industry or civil society organisations. It is significant, however, that this South African definition adds the notion that communities are expected to be ‘disadvantaged’. So, while ‘Engagement’ implies an equal partnership relationship that can involve a range of agencies, the concept of ‘disadvantage’ immediately positions communities in an unequal power relationship with their universities. Similarly, the South African definition, unlike that by Schuetze, focuses on communities as beneficiaries of the engagement relationship rather than agents of mutual exchange. The implication of these nuances of understanding will be discussed later.

The third mission is no longer the concern of one discipline or department. It has captured the imagination of a wide range of actors. National and global organisations such as Engagement Australia, the Global University Network for innovation (GUNi), PASCAL International Observatory and Talloires Network have, in the past fifteen years, turned this historical third mission into a social justice agenda for community empowerment as a central priority for universities. Their goal is to strengthen higher education’s role in society within its varying socio-economic and cultural contexts. Community

engagement, for these organisations, takes centre stage, whereby higher education institutions partner with their local or regional neighbours to produce a shared vision for development. Grau (2014: 3), the non-executive director of GUNi, argues that the university of the 21st century must also be measured by the extent to which it interacts with the socio economic and cultural environment as a contribution to the university's market goals. In this argument, the university's interaction with the environment generates knowledge which can be transformed into: 'economic value, productivity and competitiveness. In turn this creates jobs and wealth and helps to lay the basis of a balanced, advanced, just and sustainable society'. Innovation, he argues is no longer the prerogative of universities:

Universities need to understand that they are fundamental to the process of creating knowledge but that they do not have the monopoly; they should recognise (and work with) the institutions involved in knowledge creation outside the sphere of higher education in all fields (Grau 2014: 5).

These arguments hinge on our changing understandings about the creation and ownership of knowledge and the university's role in distributing and using that knowledge for a better world. Bivens, Haffenden and Hall (2015: 9) distinguish between the concepts of 'knowledge economy', 'knowledge society' and 'knowledge democracy' in relation to CE. They highlight how knowledge economy refers to a competitive skills development agenda. In contrast, knowledge society focuses on the 'use of knowledge to strengthen or deepen participatory decision making'. But they argue that knowledge democracy takes us one step further in that it explicitly recognises the multiplicity of knowledge and the fact that such knowledge derives from an array of sources and methods. In other words, university knowledge is not the only kind or source of knowledge. An expansion of this knowledge agenda is articulated in the context of knowledge democracy and cognitive justice (Gaventa & Bivens 2014; Hall 2015). Here it is argued that knowledge is embedded in power relationships and defined by who has authority to know. The struggle to overcome dominant forms of knowledge has come to be articulated 'as the struggle for cognitive justice' (Gaventa & Bivens 2014: 70). These concerns are particularly relevant for community based knowledge.

Community based knowledge is rarely discipline specific because it is embedded in context and the practical realities of living. Gibbons (2006: 28) has coined the terms mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge to reflect the distinction between discipline specific knowledge (mode 1), which is tested in laboratory conditions and thus known as ‘reliable knowledge’, and ‘socially robust’ knowledge which is context specific and embedded in practice. It has been argued that mode 2 knowledge is multidisciplinary because it is constructed collaboratively between a variety of actors (Muller & Subotzky 2001). In this respect mode 2 knowledge can be the outcome of collaborative community based research which has been classified in South Africa under the ‘scholarship of engagement’ (O’Brien 2009). Such new knowledge, for example, could be a combination of scientific expertise for pest control and more experiential knowledge about soil fertility in a particular location. It might be knowledge gained from the community about the healing or nutrition properties of herbs which can then be analysed academically for their applicability for a variety of illnesses or nutrition supplements.

Nations and universities themselves have paid more or less attention to this alternative vision for university engagement. In South Africa, these policies took shape after the introduction of nation-wide democracy, following the collapse of the apartheid regime in 1994. In 1997 the White Paper on the *Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education 1997: 10-11) emphasised a commitment to the ‘common good’ and the ‘social responsibility’ of universities which could be articulated through community service programmes as part of the university mandate for its students. This commitment was in recognition of the fact that university education still serves an elite minority of the population. Although participation rates in South Africa now reach approximately 19% of the eligible age group (Council on Higher Education 2013), in 1997 the figure was significantly lower. Subsequent policy documents such as the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001) and the Higher Education Qualification Committee (HEQC 2006) guidelines for teaching, research and community service have been reinforced in the most recent White Paper on Post School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013: 39). It is notable that the latter document now uses the term ‘community engagement’ interchangeably with ‘community service’ which is described as encompassing a wide range of university activities and identified as:

... socially responsive research, partnerships with civil society organisations, formal learning programmes that engage students in community work as a formal part of their academic programmes, and many other formal and informal aspects of academic work (ibid).

The same document has now steered CE to be integrated into the university's teaching and research functions so that it is not a stand-alone activity. In reality, this means that most formal CE activities are translated into what is commonly described as 'service-learning'. This concept is borrowed from the United States where service-learning was introduced as a curriculum based activity, whereby students undertake some form of placement within a community setting, reflect on the learning they have gained from the experience and thereby gain credit for this documented reflection as part of their course work (Howard 2001).

Service-learning

Although not all service-learning programmes operate in the same way, the majority are semester based and take place as part of a menu of other courses so that students have to negotiate their time in community placements around other lecture and course work demands. The length of 'service' may be limited to 30 hours over a period of three or four months (Preece 2016). Longer placements often take place in professional development degree programmes such as medicine, teaching or social work. In this case, students are more likely to follow 'work placement' models where they involve themselves in communities as a form of professional development in their specific discipline.

Although the service-learning strategy secures the university's link with its surrounding communities and relevant organisations, it is a model which potentially constrains the university-community relationship and what can be achieved. Much of the topic's academic literature, for example, concerns itself with exploring the pedagogical aspects of small scale service-learning programmes within the university (for example Maistry & Thakrar 2012), the nature of a service-learning curriculum (Albertyn & Daniels 2009) or the benefits to students of engaging with their communities (for example, Hill *et al.* 2008). However, the capturing or facilitating of this reflection is rarely extended to community members themselves, in spite of their status as partners (Bender 2008). There is an assumption in much of the literature that

community members actively contribute to the creation of new knowledge, but rarely is the community voice captured in the research or knowledge construction process. Hatcher and Erasmus (2008), for instance, emphasise the need to pay more attention to indigenous ways of knowing. Erasmus (2011) has also argued for more culturally sensitive and pedagogically embedded curricula, which contribute to community empowerment and co-creation of knowledge.

There is an increasing body of literature which challenges or critiques the extent to which university CE and its service-learning component address issues of power, inequality of relationships, or the sustainability of short term involvement by students in community issues. A few examples are given here.

Albertyn & Daniels (2009) and Erasmus (2011a), for instance, question the extent to which the power differentials between grass roots community members and university members allow knowledge to be genuinely co-constructed. Similarly, when strategies for consultation are built into university-community relationships there may be several layers of community agents so that one layer of the community may have been consulted, but that consultation does not necessarily filter down to other layers (Osman & Attwood 2007).

These tensions, it has been argued (Preece 2016) are historically constituted through notions of governmentality (Miller & Rose 1993) whereby universities have already defined, labelled and characterised communities as marginalised, poor, disempowered and in need of care. This argument has a particular resonance in post-apartheid South Africa whereby universities' responsibilities to their communities were enshrined in government reform policy for higher education. Thus the act of service-learning as a benign act upon communities is legitimated.

The above literature feeds into the argument of this paper - that service-learning, as a particular aspect of CE, contributes to pre-identified community needs, captured hegemonically as a benevolent contribution, rather than working with communities to help them maximise their assets.

Some literature addresses community based and participatory research as a solution to concerns about the co-creation of knowledge (Hall *et al.* 2013). This category of empirical work includes a wider range of experiential student learning than service-learning alone but has recently developed as a methodology for engaging communities in mutually beneficial and participatory ways. The overriding concern among these writers is that

research paradigms need to be participatory to allow for a plurality of perspectives and that all participants should be involved in contributing to the research design (Erasmus 2011; Hall *et al.* 2015). Recommended methodologies are primarily qualitative, and often premised on an action research approach. Community based research is described as:

Research that is responsive to societal needs, that is carried out in a community setting, where the process involves the community and the results promote social equity (Daniels, Adonis, Mpofu & Waggie 2013: 156).

There are examples of service-learning activities which are integrated into community-university research partnerships as shared spaces for co-creation of knowledge. Lepore and Herrero (2015) in the context of Argentina, describe how community-university research partnerships in selective universities utilise service-learning activities as an integral part of participatory research activities with civil society organisations. In the context of Canada, Brown, Ochocka, de Grois and Hall (2015) refer to the rise of indigenous research community partnerships which link community controlled research agendas with students' experiential learning in communities. These approaches point to a shift in understanding about knowledge dimensions and of communities as asset-based resources, rather than deficit-burdened (Hall *et al.* 2015).

Critiques of service-learning which expose its sustainability issues for communities have paved the way for a model that incorporates service-learning activity into a more encompassing community development approach to engagement which recognises communities as partners in the co-creation of knowledge. The trend in terminology is now moving towards notions of 'critical service-learning' (Ringstad, Leyva, Garcia & Jasek 2012). Theoretical concerns place more emphasis on power and privilege, the notions of 'radical' and 'transformative' community service-learning (Gerstenblatt & Gilbert 2014; Sheffield 2015). Nevertheless, the service-learning literature makes very limited reference to asset-based community development theory. Among the exceptions, Gerstenblatt and Gilbert (2014) for instance, refer to a community based approach to exploring community assets in their social work.

The literature on community development emphasises that this is a contested term. For the purposes of this paper development can be defined as an end goal of agency: 'the capacity of people to order their world, the capacity

to create, reproduce, change and live according to their own meaning systems' (Bhattacharyya 2004: 12). Bhattacharyya makes the connection in this definition to Sen's notion of freedom.

Community development is the process of enabling this to happen. In Vincent's (2009: 63) terms it is a 'process through which people learn how they can help themselves'. Community development, therefore, is distinguished from CE because its focus is on enhancing human agency within the community. The focus of service-learning through CE has, in the past, privileged the learning needs of the student and focused on the contribution the CE process makes to the academic agenda. A community development approach to CE endeavours to reverse that relationship. In support of the apparent trend towards community and social change, Stoeker (2016) argues that service-learning needs a different set of theories that move beyond the dominant focus on pedagogy and student development.

It is this latter literature which particularly resonates with the question of how to address power differentials in such a way that community participants are not trapped into colluding with the hegemonic discourse of equality and benevolence. In other words, how can community members have ownership over their own development agenda and how can they have an equal stake in engagement relationships with universities? The rest of this paper proposes a theoretical framework that draws on adult education principles of dialogue, asset-based community development and capabilities literature with a view to identifying a community-centred model of engagement. This will be followed by a brief discussion on policy implications for such a model. My argument for pursuing this theoretical window of opportunity is premised on a need to find a curriculum approach which privileges the community as much as the student. While credit-based assessment of student critical reflection addresses student growth, it does not provide a tool for evaluating or engaging with community growth or social change. The aim is to facilitate a more mutually penetrable relationship between knowledge dimensions and reduction of power differentials.

A Proposed Theoretical Framework for Community Engagement

Service-learning is only one component of CE, although it is often the most formalised university strategy in South African contexts. The following

discussion is premised on a more composite picture of CE as a whole university project, whereby service-learning may or may not feature as a core component. A substantive portion of this text derives from the draft chapters of a proposed book to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017 or 2018 (*Lifelong Learning and Community Engagement: The Porous University*).

Capabilities Perspective

During the past 15 years, the capabilities perspective, or approach as it is sometimes called (fostered largely by Amartyr Sen and Martha Nussbaum), has captured the imagination of many disciplines. A particular proponent of the capabilities perspective as a means of advocating the ‘public good’ role of higher education has been Melanie Walker. Her focus has been to develop a higher education curriculum that nurtures a sense of social justice and responsibility towards society among higher education students (Walker & Loots 2016). But Walker’s analysis to date does not sufficiently capture the ‘community’ perspective in terms of exploring CE as a collaborative and partnership relationship.

Furthermore, the capabilities literature emphasises that the capabilities approach in itself is not a complete theory and needs to be aligned with, or enhanced by, additional theories in order to apply its understandings to a particular concern. This paper therefore builds particularly on Sen’s arguments but supplements those discussions with reference to asset-based community development theory which speaks directly to the community voice. It starts by outlining the capabilities perspective.

Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) come from different disciplinary backgrounds. But they have both envisioned a more humanitarian way of exploring how human life should be evaluated from a social justice perspective. Their disciplines and rationales have influenced their arguments and areas of focus, but they overlap in terms of the core concern that human development rests on the degree to which individuals have access to a range of freedoms to lead the life they have reason to value. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on Sen’s position. Sen argues that freedoms focus not on what one has but what one has agency to use or benefit from. In other words, people’s freedoms include their entitlements but also their sense of agency to make choices about how to use their entitlements. Sen is concerned with how ‘unfreedoms’ (1999: xii) restrict or constrain one’s ability to convert available

resources into achievable functionings. Sen identifies ‘five distinct types of freedom’ as ‘political’, ‘economic’, ‘social’, ‘transparency guarantees’ and ‘protective security’ (1999: 10). These provide the capability set of a person or community. They are opportunities that people have which enable actions and decisions to be taken in the context of personal and social circumstances. But true freedom only comes about when the social environment allows people to take advantage of their entitlements.

In CE terms, one might argue therefore that university interactions with the community which do not facilitate collaborative processes of decision making are denying community members their opportunity for agency to influence how the university supports their social or other needs and desires to lead the lives they have reason to value. At a very basic level, a university, for instance, which fails to recognise cultural concerns to respect Islamic prayer times by organising a meeting date for Friday lunchtime is restricting the freedoms of Muslims to attend the meeting. The Muslim community therefore is unable to convert the availability of a meeting into the function of actually attending the meeting.

At a more macro level Sen points out that poverty is an expression of the deprivation of many basic capabilities beyond the aspect of income. Unemployment, for instance, impacts on the individual psyche at a level of confidence, self-esteem and agency. Poverty is often also connected to other capability deprivations in terms of access to nutrition, life expectancy, literacy levels, and health services. At a community level, these capability ‘unfreedoms’ can be expressed through violence and anger which impact on the capability freedom of protective security and transparency guarantees. Such expressions are often evident in South African communities through protests at government failure to provide basic services such as electricity and water.

Development, therefore, is the ‘process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’ (Sen 1999: 36). Education is a basic capability freedom which impacts on all other capabilities and freedoms because education enables people to make informed choices about the lives they have reason to value. The university, as a public good, has a responsibility to contribute to that process (Boni & Walker 2013). Capability freedoms include having suitable levels of literacy and numeracy, being able to avoid starvation or escape premature mortality and being able to enjoy participation in democratic elections. Freedoms therefore are both instrumental - a *means* to development

- and evaluative - an *end* goal of development. A 'capability set' is the combined set of freedoms that enables people to convert their assets into 'functionings' (Sen 1999: 75) or achievements according to what they want to achieve. In this respect, Sen argues that there is not one universal capability set which will suit everyone. People's circumstances and life aspirations vary.

The capability perspective focuses on context and whether people make choices as an option or because there simply is no choice. For instance, a person with a disability who chooses to stay at home because he or she has no freedom to take up employment outside of the home is capability deprived. But a person with a disability who experiences no restrictions in terms of employment or education opportunities is free to choose to live at home if his or her capability set enables him or her to do so. The emphasis, therefore, is on a person's true freedom to choose.

Sen (2009) defends his position in the face of criticisms that the capability perspective is too individualistic and does not take account of communities as collectives. He argues that although individuals make choices about their lives, they always do so within a social context. People belong to many different groups and are always connected to their society. (Even if they choose to 'opt out' it is still in the context of a response to existing social arrangements). This argument is important for the CE context since 'communities' are what universities engage with, rather than isolated individuals, even though individuals may represent their social groups when interacting with university representatives.

Service-learning is an important contribution to expanding the capabilities of communities but it does not fully capture the essence of how the university as a public institution should be a capability resource in its entirety for community development. Its focus tends to be more on expanding the capability awareness and civic responsibilities of the students themselves. In essence, it often means that community members rarely, if at all, step inside the university premises, thus creating a symbolic power divide.

Vaughn and Walker (2012: 499) produce a diagram to articulate the complexity of how capability sets, as freedoms to achieve, are influenced by social contexts and environmental factors, people's personal histories and what resources they have to convert their assets and services, and ultimately how individuals make choices to achieve certain functionings. In other words, the means to achieve, (capability inputs), can be affected by context which influences opportunities and freedoms to make choices for particular

functionings (the achievements or ends). A possible translation of this diagram into a CE context could thus be described as follows. The university as a social institution in a working class community has potential resources such as sports facilities, computer classrooms and individual staff and students with disciplinary expertise. If community members are given access to those resources, they may be able to convert these resources (new knowledge, additional skills and people, new understandings) into a set of freedoms or opportunities to impact on an identified need or problem such as insufficient electricity or limited childcare provision. The achieved functionings – perhaps solar powered lighting or a community crèche - will be the outcome of decisions and choices based on an expanded capability set (freedoms and opportunities). In this respect communities acquire increased agency and the university performs a public good function. Vaughn and Walker, however, fall short of taking their diagram and approach into the community dimension. Their focus is on the development of university students rather than a direct capabilities relationship between universities and communities.

Moreover, this model does not acknowledge that communities may already have resources that could be harnessed to solve their own problems. In addition, the power relationship between universities and communities is under-developed in the capabilities literature, even when the public good role of universities is well articulated, as it is by Walker (see Walker & Loots 2016 in relation to the role of universities in developing citizenship responsibility). Boni and Walker (2013) argue vehemently, for instance, that:

The university should not be distant from the tremendous problems the world faces nowadays ... it should have an active role, engaged in local and global spaces, to foster and support a just and sustainable society (2013: 2) ... universities can have a role as a place of interconnectivity in society (2013: 6).

An important consideration, therefore, is the sense that a capability set is also a power set, which in turn creates an obligation to use that capability responsibly. Sen does not elaborate too much on this latter concern. He merely states that ‘capability is ... only one aspect of freedom, related to substantive opportunities’ (2009: 295) and that ‘capabilities are the characteristics of individual advantages [which] fall short of telling us about the fairness or equity of the processes involved’ (ibid: 206).

The capabilities literature in relation to nurturing student civic responsibilities, does not discuss the extent to which communities may already have capability sets or how those capability sets can be developed as community assets. The engagement relationship, therefore, should also be concerned with encouraging communities to recognise and build on their own assets or capability sets in order to minimise their ‘adaptive preferences’ (Nussbaum 2000: 139) in the context of partial freedoms. These latter concerns mean that we need to look beyond the capabilities literature in order to complete our potential CE model. At this point it is useful to draw on the asset-based community development literature and references to the role of dialogue.

Asset-based Community Development

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is one approach among many. It was developed in the United States during the early 1990s as an alternative to deficit models of community development. The approach has gained momentum during the past 15 years because it challenges the needs-based philosophy that focuses on community problems whereby external agencies intervene with a view to ‘fixing’ community deficits. The main proponents for ABCD were Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), through their book called *Building communities from the inside-out: asset-based community development*. More recently Cunningham and Mathie (2002) have popularised it further.

These above authors are widely cited when describing the approach as ‘a set of strategies for identifying and mobilising community assets for change’ (Boyd, Hayes, Wilson and Bearsley-Smith 2008: 191, for example). Assets can be at individual level (such as vocational or practical skills), organisational level (such as social networks and financial or physical resources) or externally controlled institutional resources that are geographically located within the community field (such as schools or clinics) (Ennis & West 2010). Although Ennis and West also critique this approach, essentially, the argument is that all communities have assets and strengths which can be harnessed for change. If communities are not fully engaged in identifying and finding solutions to their own problems, or motivating for change, then externally imposed interventions can only serve to undermine communities and their own capacities. If communities feel a sense of ownership over their own destiny by drawing on existing assets and strengths as a resource for change, then their members are

more likely to accept external agencies as partners in the development process. In African contexts the spirit of collectivism which characterises the ABCD approach is an essential feature that acknowledges Africans' communitarian history (Chirisa 2009). Chirisa emphasises that the approach is more than a set of strategies. It also requires relationship building and engaging with the social and environmental nature of particular contexts.

Cunningham and Mathie (2002: 1-3) identify a set of six principles which underpin ABCD. The first is that any engagement should focus on recognising what already exists in terms of social, human and practical resources in a community setting. Secondly, the development goals should be community-led. Thirdly, an appreciative enquiry approach is required – that is, to understand, from the community perspective, what previous success stories can be built on. A fourth principle is that the development process must be participatory to ensure community ownership over decision making. Closely connected to this is that the development process must be collaborative. Finally, in order to enhance the collective process, civil society and other community based organisations need to be involved in leveraging both their constituent members and external resources. There are examples of this approach in developing country contexts. For example, Hipwell (2009) describes how the ABCD approach became part of a 'post development practice' for indigenous development in Taiwan which included attention to cultural assets such as language and spirituality as a means of community empowerment.

In terms of how the ABCD approach is a practical extension of the capabilities concept, ABCD could be construed as capabilities building – enabling people to identify their freedoms and articulate how those freedoms could be converted into functionings. Ssewamala, Sperben, Zimmerman and Karimli (2010) reflect on the potential effectiveness of this relatively understudied approach in Sub Saharan Africa. They specifically link ABCD to Sen's concept of capabilities as a contribution to enabling individuals and their communities to take more control over improving their lives within specific contexts. They stress that this approach needs further testing and revising in the field.

Dialogue

The use of dialogue and discussion is seen as central to enabling people to

‘map, analyse and assess what assets they have or would like to have’ (Westoby & Dowling 2013: 3). Rule (2015) points out that dialogue, at its most basic, is a reciprocal exchange between two or more people. He describes it as a relationship framed by context and meaning making. As such it is a resource for teaching, learning and knowing. In community development contexts it is also a space for challenging power relations and building shared understanding (Westoby & Dowling 2013). Dialogue, therefore, is neither a safe space nor a space without power. But if the goal of community development or CE is collective action for change, dialogue is a positive tool for a ‘committed relationship with the marginalised’ (Westoby & Dowling 2013: 12) in the spirit of solidarity and co-investigation. Dialogue is thus a ‘sense-making’ process (ibid: 17). From a pedagogical perspective it draws on Freirian notions of emancipation of the oppressed whereby teachers and learners engage in mutual listening as co-learners. A key aspect of Freire’s approach for educators (which we can interpret for the purpose of this paper as university educators) is that they must first familiarise themselves with the learning context and act ‘as sympathetic observers with an attitude of understanding what they see’ (Freire 1972: 82). From this position of observer, the educator can reflect back the community participants’ perspectives with a view to encouraging them to re-visit their context in order to help them ‘perceive reality differently’ (ibid, p. 86). This process becomes a process of meaning making as a shared endeavour - one of ‘cooperative and reciprocal inquiry’ (Gravett 2001: 20). An essential feature of this relationship is the building of trust and credibility, and a non-judgemental attitude. It is an aspirational, ideological position which requires hard work from all participants. It also, for university-community engagement purposes, arguably entails a process of familiarisation by the community of the university environment. This is an observation that is rarely made in the literature (Bruning, McGrew & Cooper 2006).

The following model (figure 1) is suggested as a potential guideline for drawing on ABCD as a means of realising the capabilities perspective through university CE. The ultimate goal is to create a two-way communication flow, whereby community members themselves feel free to enter the university premises to dialogue about potential collaborations that draw on community assets as a mutually accessible capability set that can translate into action for change.

In this model the community assets may be human skills, cultural knowledge, economic resources, social capital, or physical resources such as

buildings. The university's participation will be to engage in dialogue with the community (of place, interest groups and other institutions) and facilitate mutual asset mapping, including discussions on how those assets can be converted into freedoms and opportunities to lead the lives they have reason to value. This will entail action planning and possible inclusion of additional resources or institutional assets. The dialogue will explore the potential conversion factors within the community and university, in terms of their personal (such as health and well-being), social (such as cultural norms and policies that might affect what men, women and marginalised groups can do) and environmental (such as the geographical terrain and weather conditions which might affect what can be grown or planted). The cumulative assets and their conversion potential will provide the capability set of freedoms and opportunities (political, economic, social, transparency guarantees and protective strategies). This capability set will then determine the choice that individuals and groups feel they can make in order to take action. The achieved functionings will be the outcomes of those actions. Such community outcomes may, for example, be enhanced qualifications, increased income generation activities or a new school or safe play space for children. University outcomes may be a revised curriculum or timetable or use of university facilities.

Since the literature has emphasised that the community field is a constantly changing set of relationships, this model is an iterative process which also has to negotiate power relations and the tensions and struggles that that entails. The engagement process may be initiated by a community interest group or any individual and may not necessarily be initiated by the university, depending on the nature of the asset mapping process. The community based research models, as articulated earlier in this paper are potential mechanisms to capture the concept of asset mapping. The ultimate aim is for boundaries between university and community to become porous, whereby both university and community gain new understanding for change and interact fluidly as neighbours.

Policy Implications

It has long been argued that universities need an institutional infrastructure that facilitates CE in a coordinated way. The barriers to policy implementation or the operationalisation of organisational goals 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 (Preece & Manicom 2015).

Policy implications for institutional change are remarkably similar in publications across the international spectrum. Bivens *et al.* (2015) highlight that policy needs to be addressed at national and institutional level. Government policies, for example which attach funding incentives to their guidelines for engagement are more likely to motivate institutions to devise internal university processes that support CE. Within the higher education institution itself it is emphasised that support must be top-down and bottom-up. For instance, mission statements require leadership at all levels of the institution. Some of the best examples of engaged universities include a coordinating infrastructure, perhaps including a central community office, fundraising activities, professional recognition in tenure and promotion arrangements as well as staff development programmes. Bivens *et al.* also point out that strategies for bringing in professionals from the community into the university staffing structure is an important factor in building partnership relationships. Watson (2007: 60) elaborates, calling such staff members ‘community-university brokers who can work across different cultures and in different languages’. He confirms that micro level behaviours are also necessary such as establishing a working dialogue with people in and outside the institution about processes and engagement structures, setting up strategic links, working to the strengths of the institution as well as the community. Important in these arrangements is the creation of community ‘spaces’ in the university itself and creativity about working round conventional university systems because the community rhythm and way of working is often very different.

The attached model does not address these challenges. Rather it proposes a theoretical value base for evaluating the CE process which starts with the community voice (an expression of assets) and concludes with an analysis of change for both community and university. The model is offered as a basis for discussion that could inform these policy challenges.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has argued that a theoretical framework, drawing on the capabilities

perspective and asset-based community development, with a focus on dialogue, addresses the current literature gap regarding the expansion of the service-learning curriculum and ways in which knowledge boundaries can become more porous. This framework is stimulated by the following argument.

In the context of an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, universities are no longer seen as the primary knowledge producers. As such, they should connect more collaboratively with other knowledge producers and other sources of knowledge. There is a growing understanding that the world's challenges require collaborative solutions. To this end, universities have an obligation to partner with other knowledge providers, including those in community settings. Similarly, the trend towards massification of higher education means that universities cannot distance themselves from society and can no longer embrace their stereotypical 'ivory tower' image.

The engagement imperative, in emerging economies, is often linked more closely to the need to advance democracy, address inequalities and social justice. As a reflection of this argument, several recently established national and international organisations, such as the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi) emphasise that universities have a role to play in the development of responsible citizens. This vision for higher education as a development agent is also reinforced through the new Sustainable Development Goal 4 for lifelong learning.

This combination of imperatives – the development of knowledge societies and knowledge democracies and the contribution of higher education to responsible citizenship – was the impetus for this paper. I presented a potential model of university CE, whereby the university becomes a participatory listening agent, as opposed to an interventionist. In this model, it is argued that a combination of asset-mapping through dialogue and collaborative planning can facilitate the conversion of community assets, as combined capability sets (freedoms and opportunities), into community-led choices for action. The process of identifying and validating those assets through action planning within specific cultural and social contexts can build agency (self-determination) which can result in enhanced development outcomes (achieved functionings). The dialogic process within this model is essential to address underlying power relations at macro and micro levels. But the additional factor for the porous university is for the dialogic process of familiarisation of each other's environment to be taken literally.

The policy implications impact at national and institutional level. They require a conceptual re-think about the nature of knowledge, and the engagement relationship as a negotiation of assets and conversion factors which may lead to outcomes that community and university may have reason to value. Essentially this means the university is porous – both physically, in allowing access into its premises, and intellectually, in allowing knowledge to be socially defined.

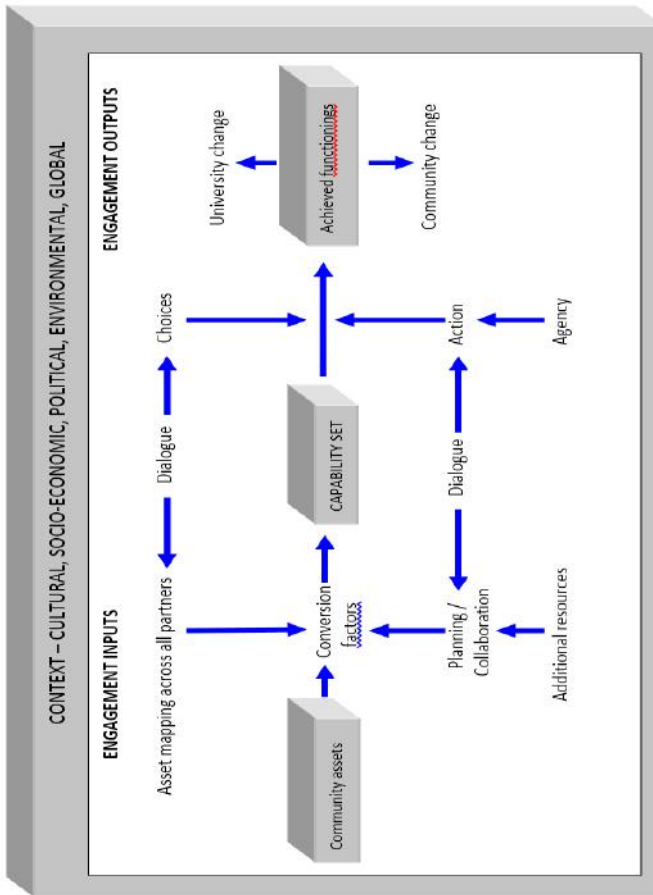


Figure 1: Community engagement model drawing on the Capability and ABCD literature

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