Service Learning in South Africa Held Terminally Captive by Legacies of the Past

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Introduction

In accepting one of Community Service Learning's (CSL) distinguished accolades from the University of the Free State, in October, 2004, Robert, G. Bringle (2004:9) predicated his presentation by quoting the following words from Boyer's definition of civic engagement:

> The scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to schools to our teachers and to our cities ....

Following Boyer, he continued to say that,

> what is needed is not just more programmes, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction. Ultimately, the scholarship of engagement also means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other (Bringle 2004:10).

Then, to concretize the above, Bringle (2004:12) stated that, if higher education institutions develop 'community/academy partnerships', they will be the 'best places to live, work and learn' (in this, he referred to a similar statement by Dean Platers' vision for Indiana University – Purdue University

Indianapolis (IUPUI)).

In our view, the above insights resonate very closely with those of Steve Biko who is quoted as having said that,

> we have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face (SB: http://www.sbf.org.za/foundation, 2005/01/07).

Confronted by Bringle and Biko's understanding of civic engagement, community service learning or community engagement, we were alerted to the fact that these do not refer to the same things among their practitioners. This article therefore attempts to show that there are at least three levels at which community engagement, community service learning or civic engagement can be theorized and practiced.

The first level is referred to as being *in the* community where CSL is understood and practiced along the lines of *charity*. The second level is that of CSL understood along the lines of a *project* (see Morton 1995 and Keene & Colligan 2004) and the third level deals with CSL as being *of the* community, which is;

> genuinely collaborative and driven by community rather than campus interests; that democratizes the creation and dissemination of knowledge; and that seeks to achieve positive social change (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoeker & Donohue 2003).

The most important question for us is to determine the level at which CSL is theorized and practiced in South Africa. In response to this question we noted that prior to the current wave of CSL practices there were attempts at CSL practice in the recent past exemplified in Steve Biko and the Black People's Conventions' efforts (see for example Burke://www.infed.org/thinkers/biko.htm 2005/03/14). To us this version of CSL, while not sponsored by and through the university, was a genuinely committed engagement which was totally emancipatory, symbiotic to/with the

beneficiary community to which the practitioner(s) belonged. It was overtly geared towards social transformation which was about holistic emancipation in all its forms. This CSL represented greater affinity to the community. This kind of theorization and practice (praxis) was truncated through political actions of the apartheid state[1] until Perold (1998) through the Joint Education Trust reported new efforts to 'find' and re-establish CSL formally in South African Higher Education institutions. In our view, this second wave of CSL was grossly academic and removed and had agendas foreign to the community embedded within itself. The conclusions we come to is that it is hard for this 'sanitized' CSL to be in sync with the heart-beat of the community. It is either 'in the community' (charity metaphor) or between the former and 'of the community' (project metaphor) and never genuinely engaged.

In this paper we put most of the blame on the inability to deliver, of the current wave of CSL theory and practice, squarely on the shoulders of historical legacies that continue to stranglehold growth and development of CSL towards a totally emancipatory, symbiotic relationship with the beneficiary community to which the practitioners belong. This stranglehold, we argue, is terminal in spite of the good intentions, or otherwise of practitioners, and stakeholders.

The Problem in a Nutshell

The problem as we see it is that CSL theory and practice has not as yet decided to genuinely

> connect the rich resources of the University to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities.

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[1] Biko; http://wwwnathanielturner.com/bikospeaksonafrica.html; 2005/03/ 14; Burke; http://www.infed.org/thinkers/biko.html;Husbands;http://www stanford.edu/~jbough/saw/Ajani_Biko.html;2005/03/14;Mokgatle;http://ww w.nathanielturner.com/autobiographyunknownsouthafrican.html;2005/03/14.

The problem as we furthermore see it is that higher Education is still focused on just more and more programmes and not genuinely 'on a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction'. And ultimately, 'the creation of a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other seems far removed if not impossible to even begin to conceptualise.

As CSL practitioners we still have to seriously realize that our future and that of the so-called communities is one, and that for us all to survive we need to genuinely step out of our ivory towers (or down from our high horses) and get into the quagmire and squalid conditions of poverty, marginalization and deprivation alleviation. In short, the problem as we see it, is that as CSL practitioners we still have not come to realize that an injury to one member/aspect of the community is an injury to all of us, including the higher education community as well.

Put differently, in this article we attempt to demonstrate that perhaps because of our history as a nation we as institutions of higher learning are not able to move to the stage of genuine commitment to civic engagement, hence our being bogged down to only practice 'CSL as charity' and at best 'CSL as a project' but we are never genuinely committed to civic engagement.

In order to systematize our discussion with regard to the above aim we firstly describe the lens (theoretical framework) we have used so as to identify, unpack and respond to the problem. Secondly, we define the three levels at which CSL can be conceptualized and operationalized, using four basic tenets of CSL, namely, preparation, action, reflection and evaluation in an attempt to meet our stated aim. Fourthly, we highlight instances from the thirteen reports identified as outstanding CSL projects in 2004 by the Joint Education Trust to substantiate the point. Finally we draw conclusions and round off the discussions.

The Lens
Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School established in 1924 (Wuthnow Hunter, Bergesen & Kurzweil 1985) seem to provide the most appropriate theoretical framework to enable us to address the issues we have outlined above. In constituting communities and societies, Habermas identified three

basic cognitive interests that stand at the heart of the process, namely, work, language and power. Firstly, people come together in aggregates of communities and/ or societies in order to be able to work meaningfully and effectively together for the continued existence of the human species. Secondly, another reason for constituting communities and/ or societies is for human beings to be able to talk to one another (language or interpretation) so as to facilitate their collective pursuits, like work, procreation, and so on. Finally when these humans come together there is a need to organize themselves into meaningful and effective units as in community and/or society. For such organisation, the exercise of power plays a central role (Wuthnow et al. 1985).

Developing his argument further, Habermas identifies three forms of knowledge corresponding to these three basic cognitive interests. The first is that of technicist and positive knowledge which is mainly descriptive, quantitative in nature and seeking universal laws, large patterns, causality and prediction. This kind of knowledge is necessary in order to enhance *work* and is therefore reliant on controlling variables, the environment including other human beings. It is the form of knowledge mainly inhabiting the natural sciences where *objects* are the focus of analysis and study. However, this typically *object*-oriented knowledge form has been transplanted into the dynamic human sphere where some people believe that because of its achievements in the natural sciences (see for example the industrial revolution) it is also the best form of knowledge for understanding humans as well (Wuthnow et al. 1985).

Arising from language as basic cognitive interest category, the second form of knowledge emphasises typically human knowledge. As such it is critical of technicist and positive knowledge, and advocates human dynamics, the fluidity of human interaction and relations, seeing the human being as a speaking and interpreting being who has to be approached differently from objects in some natural science laboratory (Wuthnow et al. 1985).

Finally beyond the interpretive/hermeneutic knowledge form described above, Habermas and the Frankfurt school argue for the knowledge form that critiques excess power and the unequal distribution thereof that lead to oppression, exclusion, and marginalization. This knowledge form Habermas et. al. define as critical and emancipatory as it

questions how things are and posits the possibility of an alternative. This knowledge form sees reality as multiple and non-essentialist depending on the perspective of the beholder (Wuthnow et al. 1985).

This form of knowledge prescribes humility on the part of the knowledge seeker (researcher) in that he/she has to recognize that his/her respondents are as equally human as he/she is and as such needs to be treated with the same human respect. In this kind of knowledge form the knowledge seeker does not shy away from his/her biases – he/she affirms them as his/ her starting point. The researcher in this mode is the most important 'research instrument' as he/she has to interpret and analyse all information on the basis of his/her declared subjectivity (Douglas 1970; Fischer 1977; Plummer 1983; and Burgess 1988).

This theoretical framework is the most appropriate for us because we are on the one hand dealing with the *words* of people in written form as our information. On the other hand, we are inspired to look at alternatives to that which is overtly presented, i.e. we need a framework that would advance the emancipatory agenda as described by Habermas. A theoretical framework that critiques power relations in CSL is the most suited for the development of CSL, because, as entry point, it would lay bare power relations. It is further appropriate because it allows CSL practitioners to listen to the voices of the marginalized and 'little' people. Such a framework and practice would be the most appropriate in the context of challenges related to social transformation, social empowerment, social usefulness and meaningfulness. Viewed from the three different perspectives on CSL – CSL as charity, CSL as project and CSL as genuine commitment – this theoretical framework seems most appropriate because in each case, it allows for the theorizing and analysis of power relations from each individual perspective. It also provides a background against which critical emancipatory theory can be developed to study reciprocity (issues of power relations), intimacy, and locus of control, which are all necessary when one embarks on the basic process of CSL, namely, preparation, action, reflection and evaluation as they manifest themselves or are practiced at the three identified levels.

The Three Levels

Already we have alluded to the three levels at which CSL can be theorized and practiced, namely, CSL as charity, CSL as project and CSL as genuinely

committed engagement. At this stage it is necessary to take each level in turn and analyse the four basic tenets of CSL, namely, preparation, action, reflection and evaluation, as these form part of each level and as they are practiced by higher education institutions.

1   CSL as Charity

The CSL as charity level is the least engaged level where the power of the institution of higher education is at its maximum. There is very little recognition of the community and its value. Looking at the community or communities is technicist, there ' exists a big chasm between the knowledgeable university and the uninformed (poor, ignorant, etc.) community.

Keene and Golligan (2004) argue that a university by its very nature operates in an elevated position, materially, knowledge and know-how wise. Thus, to assume otherwise, is an impossibility or at worst a pretence, a fake and a kind of dishonesty. Because the university staff and its students constitute a different class, are possessors of material wealth and have exposure and are immersed in 'higher' forms of knowledge, going down to the community and pretending to be on the same wavelength and from the same socio-economic status, is a lie.

Assuming that the above is true, then CSL as charity is piecemeal, irregular and dependent on the rise and fall of the tides of community need and the dispensing of abundance or redundant goods and services. Students inadvertently become the go-betweens between the higher education institution and the community, keeping the community outside the institution, and the institution 'uncontaminated' by the community. The rift between community and higher education institution therefore remains. This perspective also derives from the inherent assumption that it is only through its surplus services and goods that the institution serves the community. The planning or 'preparation' of the exercise does not go further than the safety of staff and students, and, in the actual implementation of such services, it is the interests of the institution, staff and students involved which are served and not that of the community. Tinkering with the lives of people without effecting any change at all is the hallmark of theorizing and practice at this level. The shortest possible periods of time are spent in the communities.

Sometimes money or material goods are handed out to cultivate and maintain the patterns of dependency. Even the activities are of limited duration, focused on some isolated issue that may not change the situation of the members of the community for the better in the long run. Reflection after action is equally superfluous. It is not about analysis and understanding at the social structural level with the accompanying co-ordinated and well-planned intervention with the collaboration of the community. Rather CSL as charity only serves as a form of window-dressing with no long term and lasting effects and no significant impact on transformation. The larger social issues remain outside the scope of such an approach, the communities are not involved in the process, they cannot 'set the agenda' for CSL – or contribute to it – do not have control over the process, and are not 'meaningful partners'. Often, this approach is exemplified in 'short-term class projects which work against the kind of sincere relationship building that would allow us to be more of than in the community doing our work' (Keene & Colligan 2004:7).

2 CSL as Project

This level represents a halfway movement between 'CSL as charity' and 'CSL as genuine engagement'.

Planning and 'preparation' at this level will be deeper than at 'CSL as charity' level. The lecturer(s) and students may really and honestly want to become one with the less fortunate communities, operate on the same wavelength with them, be sincere in their intentions and genuinely look forward to bettering the lives of communities. They would develop scholarly projects and then put them in operation. However, 'lofty' ideals and even well-planned projects may remain on paper only, or in the heart, as materially and otherwise the lecturer and the students do not meaningfully engage the communities. They still function as an outside agency doing something *for* the community and not *with* the community. They remain different from the disadvantaged communities they intend to help, and keep in place the existing gap between the institution and the community. The intention and theorization may be good, what is still outstanding is the nature of the practice involved. The reflection on the exercise after and the evaluation of the event could in this case be sincere, but not being able to

involve the community meaningfully would still mean that there would be no lasting effects of the CSL exercise.

3   CSL as Genuine Engagement

As genuine engagement, CSL dictates that preparation should be of an exceptionally high quality starting with a very intensive critical introspection covering such issues as the real, genuine and apparent motive for wanting to be engaged with the community. How can one ensure that the community is empowered or at least not harmed by one's CSL participation? Preparation would handle such issues as how to meaningfully involve the community, how to listen to the community with regard to its needs and aspirations, and how to develop meaningful and lasting interventions with the community which would empower it in the process. Preparation is a very intense experience in anticipation of negotiating of boundaries as we move into other people's spaces. Preparation is about humility, about learning 'to question one's own privilege, priorities, and colonial baggage and hence, [being] able to engage in a truly shared endeavour' (Keene & Colligan 2004).

Preparation could then be followed by yet another empowering activity for both the community and the students. Most actions centre around issues of 'social justice' requiring expansions of focus from the poor to 'structural conditions, mechanisms of structural violence, and the global forces that create poverty' (Keene & Colligan 2004). CSL is made up of a reflection on achievements or lack of it in 'terms of sharing power with community partners and overtly challenging the dynamics of power, including those of the ivory tower'. CSL should bridge the gap between 'the scholars and the people with whom they work' (Keene & Colligan 2004:5 - 11). This level calls for activism, advocacy and bravery.

Action at this level is concrete, informed, and is about the transformation of society for the good of all. Action is selfless and involves a lot of sacrifice most of the time and even calls for *the supreme sacrifice* in defense and pursuance of the common good. Action does not involve merely useless tinkering with peripheral issues in the lives of the communities but it involves engaging with real issues that may totally change the quality of the life of whole communities. Action is about social transformation in

pursuance of social justice. Action is not purely altruistic but it is partially self-interested as the CSL practitioner is totally *with* the community she/he is engaged with. The CSL practitioner does not do anything for the 'other' or for the detached community because the community she is engaged with is hers even if it is not by birth or physical location but because he shares in all the aspirations, histories, losses and achievements of that community. Action is thus about self-development.

> Self-development is the kind of development that has not been imposed from above by so-called experts. It emanates from the community itself after the community has been equipped with the tools of critically analyzing the society, engaging in dialogue about their needs, and then adopting resolutions – on what route to take to solve problems. Only after this process, is technical expertise from outside necessary. The reliance on the community's mental and material resources – self-reliance, that is – engenders a sense of ownership of the development in question .... This does not in any way imply the rejection of external resources, but these generally are used to supplement, enhance and enrich local resources. It does mean, however, the rejection of those external resources that are offered at the cost of the community's loss of self-respect and that impinge on the community's autonomy of choice of action (http://www.sbf.org.za/foundation_index.php?article=11,January 07, 2005).

Our definition and discussion of the ideal CSL theory and practice has tilted in favour of the communities at the expense of the university, deliberately so, because of the immensity of the power of the university vis a vis the poor and the marginalised communities amongst whom the university practices its CSL. The ideal is that CSL would grow to the extent that it goes back to where it comes from, that is, the community. It should be designed and controlled by the community for the community, 'without the university', i.e. the university will not remain a distinct and separate entity from the community, but will see itself as part or at least as an aspect of the community.

The Impossibility of a Dream

Having expressed the ideal of an organic university above, we are however consciously aware of the reactionary and counter productive influences of our historical legacies that still have a hold on our society and its organs. We are birthed out of a construction that separates. Affluent members of the community or society were separated from the poor. Light complexioned members of our communities were separated from the dark skinned ones. Universities as custodians of knowledge and its production were separated from the frustrations of poverty, marginalization and exclusion.

In fact it is unthinkable of the university to practice 'CSL as genuine commitment' because of the corporatisation of the manner in which they are perceived and run. No longer are universities managed along academic departmental lines but as cost centres that produce and accrue certain levels of profit (see Jansen 2004). It is difficult to see genuinely committed CSL engagement surviving these circumstances.

Problems that we experience and see in our communities are generated by our history of apartheid capitalism to a very large extent. Apartheid capitalism is replaced by the growth, equity and redistribution strategy (GEAR) which says that the rich will become richer first and when they are satiated, then they can think of equity and redistribution of excess wealth to the poor. Inherent to this paradigm is institutionalized poverty which has to exist in order to support some becoming rich at the expense of others. This discussion might seem like a digression, but it is important to indicate that our society is structured such that poverty of certain sectors thereof is perpetuated so as to support that enrichment of the other sectors. It is under these circumstances that CSL as charity comes into the picture to enable the university and the rich in general to clear their consciences through superficial shedding of their little excess wealth and in the process tinkering a little with the material conditions of the poor and then going back to their rich environment, wash their hands and talk about their escapades into the dirty and murky streets of the disadvantaged community where they had to do this project for the university module.

Empirical Data

In order to substantiate many of the value statements and assertions made in this article we looked at the 'Service Learning Case Studies' compiled as

generous budgets that could significantly tackle the identified community problem and learning of the students effectively. If this was the case with one or other of these CSL case studies, that would have been a pointer towards the fact of CSL as genuine commitment to the civic engagement category.

The time spent out in the community also did not give anybody any time to build meaningful relationships. There was no significant time for bonding as the average time spent was in the region of 50 hours per six months. Sometimes even the sustainability plan was non-existent meaning that once the mandatory time was up there was no longer any commitment any more to the community per se.

The preparations were lukewarm in our view. Sometimes one report would show some bright idea or appropriate level of preparation, but these would not stand the test of scrutiny as other practices immediately before or after would cancel out the effect of that one or isolated moment of brilliance. We mean that on the whole there was no one CSL case study that showed a coherent and consistent adherence to the 'CSL as genuine commitment' level/category. None of these studies presented a clear cut programme of action aiming at significant social transformation practices. In all instances the status quo was taken as a given that could not be systematically tackled. Focus was always on some one isolated community issue(s) which would not make any significant change even if it was successfully tackled.

The actions reported are in keeping with the tone set by the preparation(s) as they were also not really engaging fundamental problems standing in the way of positive social transformation. Some case studies more than others were firmly located within 'CSL as a project' category. The reflections in our view were also not consistently intensive around introspection that could spur an even heightened attack of social justice issues. Always reflection of lecturers, students and sometimes community members was a complaint or an appreciation of how one or other issue was tackled by CSL intervention. The same goes for evaluation. The conclusion that we draw is that perhaps historical legacies are so powerful that they do not allow for a substantial opening up of CSL possibilities. CSL as genuine commitment to civic engagement remains a largely unaddressed issue. If CSL means a 'scholarship of engagement' in terms of what Bringle (2004) above said, then the main challenge of universities is to address the ways and

means through which they can connect their resources 'to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our children, to schools to our teachers and to our cities'. To effect real social transformation and the improvement of the quality of life of many communities in South Africa, higher education institutions have to play a leading role. To involve the communities themselves in the CSL processes, have them own them and also manage them, remains the challenge.

Conclusion
We have barely scratched the surface in terms of categories, perspectives or practices informing different kinds of CSL in our country's Higher Education Institutions. However, we hope that our reading of the situation will motivate higher education institutions to become more involved in CSL as genuine commitment to civic and community engagement. At present, CSL as sincere engagement with communities remains marginalised in higher education institutional practice, and in some cases may even be seen as antithetical to the 'nature' of the university.

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