

Chapter 45

Facilitating Active Citizenship in Students Through the Strengthening of University– Community Partnerships

Rika Swenzen

Monash South Africa, South Africa

Victoria L. Graham

Monash South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

In South Africa, the integration of community engagement into research and teaching roles is mandated through policy guidelines, which created the need for transformation of Higher Education (HE) since the late 1990s. One approach that allows such integration is service-learning and this approach is the focus of a research study conducted with field supervisors to determine the level of reciprocal engagement experienced by them. Communication plays a strong role in authentic university-community partnerships (UCPs) and Monash South Africa is cognisant of the challenges encountered with regard to diversity during placements or internships, some of which were discovered through the study. The ultimate aim of the chapter is to offer some recommendations for having a student-engaged and community-focused curriculum with reflections on its internationality and inter-disciplinary impact.

BACKGROUND TO THE SERVICE-LEARNING INQUIRY

M. Scott Peck (1987) said that “[t]he principles of good communication are the basic principles of community building. And because people do not naturally know how to communicate, because humans have not yet learned how to talk with each other, they remain ignorant of the laws or rules of genuine community.”(p. 83). Since the community-building workshops facilitated by Dr. Peck’s Foundation for Community Encouragement, much has been written and done for interpersonal communication. This chapter will focus on a specific form of community engagement by looking specifically at university-

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community partnerships and student civic engagement. Aspects of this university-community relationship will be addressed through exploring the introduction of service-learning (SL) in higher education curriculum and its international and inter-disciplinary implication.

A decade after Dr. Peck's contribution to understanding communities, the acknowledgement of community was incorporated into policy in South Africa. The White Paper on Higher Education (Higher Education Quality Committee, 2006) urges higher education institutions to make their expertise and infrastructure available for community service programmes in the interest of demonstrating social responsibility and a commitment to the common good. One way to meet this responsibility is through service-learning – a model for merging community engagement goals with higher education curriculum learning outcomes that proposes a balance between the learning of the student and service to the community.

Community engagement in higher education is where university teaching, learning, and research competence is used to build mutually beneficial relationships with communities in either strong discipline areas or around community issues (Petersen & Osman, 2013). Service-learning is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community goals. Reflection is used for the student to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Bringle, Phillips & Hudson, 2004, p. 5). Both the community and students need to be beneficiaries and the goals include both service and learning (Furco, 1996 in Higher Education Quality Committee, 2006). A related concept that also introduces the notion of active citizenship to be focused on later in this chapter is engaged scholarship, which is a model that emphasizes service-learning's values of collaboration, reciprocity, and partnership (McMillan and Stanton, 2014, p. 69).

In service learning, the notion of reciprocation is characterised by giving and taking between university and community actors. Such actions occur in cycles of contact and collaboration under favourable conditions and take place through negotiation, agreement and mediation. This may be called 'cyclical interchange'. Reciprocity in service learning is thus reliant on sound agreements between university and community actors as well as mediation within communities. (Smith-Tolken & Bitzer, 2015, p. 8)

The need for authentic university-community partnerships as one of the key principles in service-learning has an implication for higher education. To contribute to the solving of societal problems students need to cross disciplinary boundaries and lecturers need to develop a curriculum that encourages engaged learning. Communication plays a strong role in authentic university-community partnerships, especially in a collectively oriented society. As an international university with students from different African countries, Monash South Africa is cognisant of the challenges encountered with regard to diversity during placements or internships, some of which were discovered through the study referenced in this chapter.

After a look at the benefits of service-learning and the methodology of the study, the chapter starts with guiding literature on the aspects that support the development of strong university-community partnerships to form an evaluative frame for the study. From an Appreciative Inquiry conducted through semi-structured interviews with nine organisations, three themes identified from the results are discussed. The answers are sought from literature to conceptually address the question posed from the appreciative inquiry study: how to facilitate active citizenship in students and how to strengthen university-community partnerships. The background to the study will be discussed in terms of a rationale for its inclusion in higher education and the methodology for a multi-stage research project.

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