

A Critical Reflection on Community University Partnerships: Highlighting Diverse Realities

The global debate regarding engaged institutions continue to rage on. Boyer (2016) introduced the notion of an institution that is intrinsically linked to the community in which it resides. He postulated that universities were not merely located in a community but were fully-fledged members of the community. As such, the university has a vested interest in the well-being of the community and should be collaborating with the community to resolve societal challenges. Universities are increasingly expected to play a greater role in addressing local and global issues and creating transformative knowledge for social change (Sathorar, 2018). The idea that universities can contribute to and learn from the communities around them is progressively gaining attention (Bhagwan, 2017). Community engagement has emerged as a top priority at universities in order to collaborate and facilitate the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources for both universities and communities (Jadhav & Suhalka, 2016). The South African government has specifically tasked universities to contribute to broader societal transformation, and to work towards addressing the challenges facing society.

The Education White Paper 3 (1997) on the transformation of Higher Education in South Africa sets out broad national goals and refers to community engagement as an integral and core part of Higher Education in South Africa. The White Paper makes specific reference to the role community engagement can play in transforming the Higher Education system. Universities are called on, to demonstrate social responsibility and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes. Despite foregrounding community engagement and legislation encouraging the establishment of collaborative and mutually beneficial community university partnerships, this has remained a contested space. Universities globally continue to be perceived as institutions who extract information from communities without making any meaningful contributions to these communities, including not recognizing the voice and agency of the people on who they were doing research. Community partners claim that they have no say in what issues are being researched and complain about being exploited due to the power imbalance in the partnership (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021).

Thus, the critical question confronting us is: do our universities have the will, capacity, support and agency to become agents of social transformation, to bring about an equitable society. Universities need to recognize the culpability, and concurrently the possibility of how the structures that maintain the university, can ultimately transform it. This paper questions: Community Engagement for Whom and How it is done? Furthermore, the paper highlights the disjuncture that exists between the university and community objectives regarding community engagement.

Collaborative self-study was employed as the research design to allow both academics and community members involved in an engagement project to reflect on their personal experience and practices in community engagement projects. Brookfield (2017) highlights that self-study is characterised by its focus on one's own practice and one's own role in it, and looks deeply into identifying motivations, beliefs, and concerns around an aspect of practice. Collaborative self-study was employed because it's a personal, systematic inquiry situated within own research and engagement context that requires critical and collaborative reflection in order to generate knowledge, as well as to inform the broader community regarding engagement projects. The research done for this paper utilized a visual method through the use of drawings as a data gathering strategy. The drawings were supported by narratives generated by the participants to explain their drawings. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis.

The findings revealed the importance of establishing mutually beneficial relationships in community university partnerships, where the knowledge and experiences of community members are acknowledged. The analysis of the findings led to a proposal of a critical approach to community engagement by drawing on the three educational aims of critical pedagogy – humanisation, conscientisation, and problem posing in order to enhance the collaboration and collective outcomes of community university partnerships (Sathorar, 2018).

KEYWORDS: Collaboration, Community Engagement, Community University Partnerships, Collaborative Self-Study, Critical Pedagogy

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