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Decolonising knowledge: Enacting the civic role of the university in a community-based project

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The need to work in partnership with communities in a meaningful and impactful way has become a core part of university planning in many countries around the world. In the Global South, the potential for the Eurocentric knowledges and power structures to dominate such partnerships is pervasive. This article reports on findings of a participatory action research project conducted with community members in a socio-economically disadvantaged community in South Africa who had identified a need to improve school-community cooperation in educating local children. Analysis of our findings, framed against broader cultural and historical contexts, suggests that when the role of university-based ‘experts’ is one of facilitation rather than ‘delivery,’ then not only is participation more effective, but, also, the process and products of knowledge democratisation can be realised more effectively. We thus provide unique insight into the way relationships between the university and the community can be reconceptualised, from a position of knowledge and epistemic hierarchy to one of epistemic democracy. We discuss the (civic) role of the university in enabling this co-construction of knowledge, and in developing the shared meanings and understandings that promote decolonisation and enable social change.

Keywords: civic role of the university; co-construction of knowledge; community development; decolonisation; knowledge democratisation; PAR; transactional knowledge

Introduction and Context to Study

This article discusses one aspect of participatory action research (PAR) undertaken in a peri-urban area of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. A group of five teachers and seven teaching assistants (TAs) from a community-based primary school collaborated with two university-based academics (one based in South Africa, and the other in the United Kingdom) to develop a programme to help the children at school. An earlier participatory study conducted by heads of departments (HODs) and a university researcher (Seobi & Wood, 2016) had identified the need for such a programme. This study found that TAs wanted development for academic classroom support, rather than just administrative development, and that teachers wanted to improve interaction with parents. Designing a parents’ programme that the TAs could present to the community thus served both purposes. The invaluable knowledge brought to the development by community-based TAs would help to improve the programme’s relevance for the local community.

As two researchers working with the community, we were conscious of several issues that may impede full participation, and we sought to minimise their impact through employing a range of strategies, including trust-building exercises, linguistic sensitivity, and valuing local knowledge. We had some success with these strategies, but we recognised that ongoing work would be needed, and that it would at times be challenging. The research was conducted by two university academics, and so, conscious of the potential for the academy to be perceived as ‘expert’ and Eurocentric, or colonising, we hoped to counter this by enacting what Biesta (2007) calls the ‘civic role’ of the university in democratising knowledge. Through this, we intended our approach to challenge colonial legacies. Power differentials are deeply embedded in socially and economically oppressed communities in South Africa, compounded by the lasting legacy of segregation due to apartheid. We therefore aimed to reduce these (Wood & McAteer, 2017), while enabling articulation and affirmation of local knowledge in tackling the self-identified ‘problem’ of lack of parental support for children at school.

To do so we needed to confront, and potentially disrupt, the processes that embody our normal day-to-day work. We come from institutions that have traditionally been recognised as seats of learning, holding the monopoly on knowledge. Our way of being in the world is that of being ‘the more knowledgeable other,’ the pedagogue. For universities to undertake knowledge-democratising projects such as ours there is a challenge to both institutional (normally Western) concepts of knowledge and the role of academics and researchers. Strier and Shechter (2016:343) suggest that well-conceived university-community partnerships “allow universities to create more reciprocal relationships with communities, especially those affected by social inequalities,” but they caution against the impact of community perspectives that “the production of knowledge still remains an academic privilege.” We were therefore conscious of our roles in helping to create such reciprocity, through enabling articulation and valuing of local knowledge.

This phase of our study reports on the production of a parent manual developed by the group, seven members of which (the TAs) were themselves parents in the community. It was important to them that this manual was not ‘a guide to the curriculum,’ but a means through which community members could learn more about the school and how best to support their children’s schooling. During development and production of the

manual, the TAs became more aware of knowledge within the community itself, and they became more confident in their own ability to make a change. We discuss this more fully in the 'Findings and Discussion' section.

The participants met as an action learning set over a period of several months to conduct research and develop the manual, facilitated every six weeks or so by the locally-based academic. The manual contained five sections, namely sections on:

- mentoring;
- self-knowledge;
- supporting one's child in school;
- numeracy; and
- language.

The resultant manual was produced bilingually (in English and isiXhosa) and in two versions, where one was for parents in the community who would attend the programme, and the other contained facilitator guidelines for the TAs.

The PAR philosophy and the operation of the project meant that we needed to consider both philosophical and pragmatic issues of epistemic power. There was a need for us to recognise in an intellectual way the legitimacy and the authority of local knowledge (Foucault, 1977), while ensuring that processes were in place to enable its articulation and inclusion. This enaction of knowledge democracy was particularly important, as an overarching aim of the project was community transformation, which is unlikely to be realised through top-down knowledge transmission approaches (Mahlomaholo, 2013). Indeed, Kohn and McBride (2011:69) suggest that such a democratising, decolonising approach is a "re-structuring of subjects of history into agents of history." This move towards a more agentic local population is also congruent with our methodological stance. Barnes (2017:229) suggests that building effective and reciprocity-based processes is rooted in good relationships, which do not position participants as 'objects of study.' In drawing on the concepts of transactional knowledge (Dewey & Bentley, 1949), the civic role of the university (Biesta, 2007), and activist pedagogies (Freire, 2005), we explore ways in which we, as academics, could value the knowledge of members of the community, enabling their voices to contribute fully to the planning of the manual. We begin by outlining the contextual and the theoretical frameworks in relation to concepts of knowledge democracy and the civic role of the university.

Contextual and Theoretical Framing

To fully understand and contextualise issues related to knowledge construction and knowledge hierarchies inherent in the project, it is necessary to reveal the historical backdrop, and its ongoing legacy in South Africa.

A brief recent historical perspective on South African education

South Africa's recent history is one of educational as well as socio-economic oppression. The impact of colonialism is still strong, manifested in economic inequality, Eurocentric school curricula, and social disparities along racial lines. Despite the availability of church-run schools for black South Africans prior to 1953, the Bantu Education Act of that year halted funding streams for such schools, in line with Christian National Education (CNE) principles, which were premised on the concept of ethnic identity as an indicator of social and political opportunity. The World Council of Churches suggests that "[t]he pernicious ideology of so-called Christian National Education (CNE) was an instrument of cultural and political control" (Abrahams, 2000:para. 2). By 1959, the Extension of University Education Act prohibited established universities from accepting most black students. Some universities were, however, specifically created for black, coloured and Indian students. Nevertheless, by 1978, only 20% of university students were black, despite the fact that black people comprised the majority of the general population (Ocampo, 2004).

Byrnes (1996) notes that despite an increase in the number of schools for blacks during the 1960s and 1970s, curriculum, funding and policy decisions meant that such schools suffered serious deficiencies in both the quantity and the quality of resourcing. Per capita spending on black education was one-tenth of that of white education. Arguably, Verwoerd's policy of the 1950s while he was Minister of Native Affairs, where he limited the curriculum in black schools, was still operating in practice. Stating that black Africans should be 'hewers of wood and drawers of water,' he had implemented a curriculum limited to basic literacy and numeracy (South African History Online, 2017). During the 1980s and early 1990s, all-party negotiations prior to the formation of the first democratically elected government discussed ways of closing the funding gap and introducing integrated, racially inclusive schools.

Since then, despite legislative changes, the legacy of apartheid has remained; many schools still suffer resource disadvantage. This inequality has been experienced first-hand by both authors. For the past 70 years, poor black communities have been denied access to good-quality education and its benefits, including intellectual and cultural capital. School curricula have traditionally also been Eurocentric, although change is occurring in this regard. The issue of language further compounds things. Of the 11 official languages in the country, nine are indigenous. English, and to some extent Afrikaans, however, tend to be the languages of commerce and government. In the education system, the language of teaching and

learning after Grade Three is either English or Afrikaans, and state examinations must be written in one of these languages. The negative impact of this is clear in many schools in poor urban and peri-urban areas. The majority of the pupils do not speak English as their home language. Furthermore, many of the teachers have English as an additional language, and they may not be fluent in the language. The practice of code-switching in classrooms, where teachers translate English question papers and texts into the home language of the pupil, may on the surface appear to aid learners. However, many educators we have worked with maintain that it hinders pupil performance in examinations, as pupils have not gained sufficient fluency in English.

The impact of this colonial legacy is evident in many ways, two of which are relevant to this project. Firstly, the black population has been systematically and continuously marginalised in socio-economic terms, resulting in severely limited educational opportunity and a consequent loss, or silencing, of voice in public and policy-making fora. The findings of Boardman and Robert (2000:129) suggest a strong correlation between low self-efficacy at neighbourhood level and high levels of poverty, where poverty is defined holistically as 'social conditions associated with poverty (unemployment, welfare receipt, and low levels of education) and the social and cultural context in which these conditions intersect.' It can reasonably be inferred that low self-efficacy has resulted from generations of financial, educational and cultural poverty.

Secondly, the use of European/English-language educational medium (ELEM) policies "perpetuate[s] the hegemonic influence of western languages and their corresponding forms of knowledge" (Gandalfo, 2009:321). Arguing that indigenous languages are intimately tied to indigenous knowledge and cultural identity, Gandalfo (2009:324) describes traditional African indigenous knowledge as "communal, community-based, and passed down from generation to generation in a largely 'oral-aural' literacy tradition." Semali (1999:307) suggests that such knowledge derives from the "collective epistemological understanding and rationalisation of the community." Chisenga (2002:17) argues that it is "constructed in a local context for resolving local challenges," making it "difficult to transmit indigenous knowledge without indigenous language." This resonates with Freire's (1985) conceptualisation of the close relationship between language, knowledge, and ways of thinking. The dominance of the English language in schooling and public affairs thus devalues indigenous knowledges, while creating conditions that are contributory to their loss.

As we are English-speaking, Eurocentric academics, both our language and our knowledge were perceived by the teaching assistants as higher in status. However, this perception of formal, university-based knowledge being superior runs counter to the concept of knowledge as "the sum of alternative solutions" (Munz, 1985:25). Dewey's 'transactional knowledge,' or 'transactional realism' (Dewey & Bentley, 1949), takes this further, suggesting that knowledge-based expertise is always situated. There is no single way of seeing and knowing the world; our knowledge of the world is based on our 'transactions' in it. Biesta (2007:476) suggests that "we can no longer understand the knowledge monopoly of the University in epistemological terms, i.e., in terms of the assumption that scientific knowledge is better, more true and more real than everyday knowledge and should therefore have prominence." This, in acknowledging and valuing both formal and informal knowledge bases, is both a democratic and a democratising stance, and it has informed our data analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical stance therefore draws on concepts of post-colonial ecologies of knowledge and knowledge democracy, leading us to explore and consider the (civic) role of the university. These concepts derive from the work of Freire, Fals-Borda, and Santos. Freire's work in the 1960s, articulated most clearly in *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (2005), outlines concepts of critical pedagogy, in which education is seen as political, value-laden, and concerned with social justice and democracy. The process of *conscientisation* supports the development of critical consciousness, enabling critique of social structures, and a resultant move to political action. The development of critical pedagogies led to the explicit aim (e.g. Kincheloe, 2008) of decolonisation of knowledge; it has become a mechanism for questioning educational hegemony and valuing indigenous knowledges. A significant message in Freire's work is that dialogic, problem-posing pedagogies prevent knowledge imposition. Without this, he claims, there is the possibility that 'dominant elites' will encourage "passivity in the oppressed" (Freire, 2005:95). Mejía (2004:67) describes such dialogic processes as ones in which "[s]tudents are regarded as actual partners in the conversation whose aim is inquiry into reality, such that a relation is established in which the teacher does not impose his/her readings of reality on the students." While this analysis exists in relation to the teacher-student context, we believe that it can usefully be applied to other knowledge-based processes, such as our PAR process, where there are perceived power (and other) imbalances. In establishing a dialogic

process, we open up the potential for recognising a varied knowledge ecology, thus moving towards knowledge democratisation.

Santos (2007a) describes ‘abyssal thinking’ as the dominance of (usually) Western thought, predicated on distinctions which render knowledge on ‘this side of the line’ visible and legitimate, while knowledge on ‘the other side of the line’ belongs in a reality that is considered non-existent. That is, it has no place in hegemonic thought; it is invisible, defined by its “non-dialectical absence” (Santos, 2007a:2). While there is a ‘visible’ distinction and tension between knowledge that is high-status, which is often ‘scientific’ in construction, and lay and indigenous knowledges, for example, a further problem is the more deep-seated invisible distinction. This means that discussion about these distinctions and tensions only occur on ‘this side of the line,’ as that is where the knowledge that generates the distinction has both roots and legitimacy. Thus, experiences on ‘the other side’ lack agency, remain invisible, and entrench the abyssal thinking of ‘this side.’ He further suggests that this ‘other side’ is located in a specific territorial region, the colonial zone. Discussing what he calls the “epistemological cartography” (Santos, 2007a:9), he identifies ‘the other side’ as a place of incomprehensible beliefs, beyond truth and falsehood.

This concept of accepted and acceptable knowledge bases challenges us to understand the ways in which knowledge is produced, disseminated and translated into action throughout the world, on both sides of ‘the line’. Questions arise about how we can establish ecologies of knowledge, formed by interrelationships between different ways of knowing. How can ways of knowing be mobilised in democratic, democratising ways that recognise and legitimise those on both sides of this ‘line’? Hall (1992:25) suggests that we have “created an illusion and we have come to believe in it [...] that only those with sophisticated techniques can create knowledge.” Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) suggest that we must ‘stimulate popular knowledges’ to address unequal knowledge relationships and reduce the epistemicide that is the result of abyssal thinking. He sees participatory action research (PAR) as playing a key role in this.

In *Another knowledge is possible: Beyond Northern epistemologies* (2007b), Santos claims that social justice depends on cognitive justice. Arguing that while we have accepted the cultural diversity of the world, we have not yet managed this with epistemological diversity, he suggests that colonising Western practices privilege Western, “scientific” knowledge, while suppressing “subaltern” indigenous knowledges, in what he has termed “epistemicide” (Santos, 2007a:xx). Suggesting that the production of knowledge, in contrast to other social practices, is self-reflexive,

he claims that this self-reflexivity is crucial in recognising ‘the epistemological diversity of the world.’ His critique of multi-culturalism is significant in this respect. A particular criticism he levels at the concept, namely that of a cultural, apolitical, descriptive model of multiculturalism, which he claims is predicated on ‘tolerance,’ was important in our work. Tolerance, he claims, rather than promoting active involvement with others, reinforces “feelings of superiority among those who speak from a self-defined site of universality” (Santos, 2007b:xxxiv).

In a context that risked the imposition of Western hegemonies, it was important for us to support the emergence of conditions that would enable articulation and enaction of local knowledge, in a way that was complementary to the knowledge we brought to bear. Using PAR helped us work towards what Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991:31) called the correction of “unequal relations of knowledge [...] through stimulating popular knowledges.” Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991:31) suggest that this can happen by advancing “the people’s self-inquiry.”

The challenges to Western hegemonic knowledge in the late twentieth century were described by Smith (2012) as processes of decolonisation of methodologies, and they would, according to Rowell and Hong (2017:66), “free up the creative capacities of indigenous people to seek solutions to their problems”. We did not want to be working on “a kind of problem that the experts [have] to solve” (Hall, 1992:14); rather, we wanted mutually respectful and supportive processes, where knowledge democracy and empowerment are mutually constitutive. Hall (1992) argues that this is only fully realised through deep epistemological engagement. In our project, this engagement had already taken place before inception of the project, in that previous work with the school and the community had identified a problem that they themselves wanted assistance with in addressing (Seobi, 2015; Seobi & Wood, 2016). Furthermore, they had identified that as it was a community-based problem, there must be a community-based solution. Our job as academics was to help make this happen.

Rowell and Hong (2017) caution against the tendency to conform to dominant knowledge paradigms. However, they also suggest that

as long as the academy also provides space, however small, in which “academic freedom” includes being able to think critically, there continues to be room to work “outside the box” [...] to test the intellectual and practical boundaries of theory and action and to challenge the hegemony of a monocultural view of scientific knowledge (Rowell & Hong, 2017:69).

This seemed relevant and important to us, as we strove to provide the space, both literal and

epistemological, for participants to reflect on their issues, and their potential to address them.

The (civic) role of the university

Promotion of a civic role for universities comes at a time when, globally, universities are increasingly being rated competitively, and where hard data-driven metrics are used to determine their position in national and international rankings. Data sets used in such comparisons include student enrolment and measures of satisfaction, achievement, outputs, research, income, and expenditure. This focus on metrics, particularly those associated with budgets and models of accountability, is indicative of the commodification of education, which, as Schwartzmann (2013:1) suggests, “frays the moral fabric of education”, producing students who identify more as consumers than as responsible citizens.

Despite, or perhaps more accurately, alongside that agenda, universities have developed community outreach programmes, access for ‘disadvantaged’ students, and other ‘non-academic’ activities. Movements such as community universities, or ‘communiversities’ (e.g. Alt Valley Community Trust, n.d. and The Communiversity of South Africa, 2018), operate in and with communities, often in partnership with, or part-sponsored by, universities, to “[help] individuals and enterprises in our disadvantaged Communities unlock and fulfil their potential” (Alt Valley Community Trust, n.d.:para. 5). They draw primarily on resources from within the community itself, valuing local knowledge and expertise.

For many universities, addressing the question ‘What are we good for?’ (Newcastle University, 2017) has become an important way of articulating and enacting their vision. This prompts work directly in community groups, be they communities of enterprise, health and social care, or the voluntary sector, drawing on and working with located knowledge, experience and expertise, in order to improve their environment. In this way, they identify as a civic university, which “sees itself as delivering benefits to individuals, organisations and to society as a whole [...] putting academic knowledge, creativity and expertise to work, to come up with innovations and solutions that make a difference” (Newcastle University, 2017:para. 1). Morton (2016) supports this view, describing the civic role of the university as a role grounded in the cultural and social influences the university can bring to the community; he cites as an example the two million free public lectures that United Kingdom (UK) universities provide each year.

This interpretation of the civic university is, however, indicative of a particular vision of knowledge and expertise, and knowledge hierarchies. In this model, the civic role of the

university is that of a benefactor, bringing high-status knowledge to those deficient in it. Biesta (2007) posits a more democratic approach, suggesting that the university does not have a monopoly on knowledge. He draws on Dewey’s work on transactional realism, which also questions knowledge monopolisation, particularly the perceived dominance of scientific knowledge in the Western canon. Questioning what he termed the “spectator theory of knowledge” (Dewey, 1984:18) (where knowledge of the world is observed independently of ourselves) as an epistemology which privileged knowing over doing, his concept of “transactional realism” is based on the idea that as human beings, we are constantly in transaction with our world, and that our knowledge is not ‘of’ the world, but “in” the world; thus, we only know the world through our interactions within it.

The implication of this is that no single epistemology can, or should, have dominance. Expertise is ‘located,’ and hence is valid for its context, rather than being a generalisable premise. As Biesta (2007:476) suggests, this means we “no longer understand the knowledge monopoly of the University in epistemological terms,” and furthermore, “we can legitimately raise questions about the relationships between different knowledges and views of the world.” Thus, he claims, the university can no longer claim a monopoly on knowledge and therefore the associated role of ‘being an expert’ is no longer appropriate. He suggests a *new* civic role for universities, based on more reflective approaches to knowledge production, which “can make an important contribution to the democratisation of knowledge” (Biesta, 2007:478).

Two models of the civic role of the university are thus evident, namely that of ‘benevolent gifter’ of knowledge, and that of co-creator of knowledge. This second model is congruent with decolonising approaches, and it is thus the one our project sought to enact.

Methodology

Keen to act in democratic and democratising ways, we used participatory action research (PAR) as our methodological stance. PAR provides a two-way engagement process, where both researchers and the communities they will be reaching are involved in solving community problems (Nhamo, 2012:1). During the project, participants met together (sometimes on their own, and other times with invited local experts or one of the researchers) to decide on content and structure for a parenting manual they wanted to produce, to help local parents support their children at school. Meetings were documented through audio recording, which formed the basis of the data set that the researchers analysed, using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further data came from observational notes taken during one of the

meetings, where participants were modelling and reflecting with the TAs on strategies for working with parents in the community. As researchers, we kept written and photographic reflective diaries. Six TA participants were involved at this stage (one of the original seven withdrew after gaining full-time employment), as well as five teachers; all had given consent for the data collection. Ethical approval was granted by both universities prior to commencing the project.

Findings and Discussion

Two key themes arose from the data, namely knowledge (co-)production, and structural and epistemological democracy. We discuss these below, drawing on data from the field, and making reference to theoretical literature.

Knowledge (Co-)Production

We argue that the co-production of knowledge resulted from unique interactions between the facilitative knowledge brought by us, as researchers, and the local knowledge of community-member participants. The need for our approach to enable, and help overcome perceived barriers of language, power, and status, was documented in an earlier article. It was clear that initially, the participant-researcher relationship was perceived as unequal. To an extent, this perceived inequality is understandable, as the participants were members of the community whose voices had been systematically silenced, and who had been denied access to high-quality education or other provision. Furthermore, their expectation was that we would guide the project as ‘experts,’ disseminating a particular form of knowledge, which they would have to assimilate. In disrupting this perception and actuality of power imbalance, we sought to find ways of genuinely co-creating knowledge in the project. The culmination of this was seen in the production of a manual, drawing primarily on the expert knowledge of the participants. Reflecting on what they had gained from the project, both from community colleagues and from us as researchers, participants made particular mention of ways in which their own issues were identified and solved *within* their own community:

We are there to help each other. When one TA does not understand how to work with and help a child, there is always one that will help out [...] by giving each other advice on how to deal with a situation.

One participant, who had lost her own mother early in life and had then become a young mother herself, valued the ‘wisdom of the older parents’ in helping her become a better parent to her children. It was also clear that participants began to feel that the relationship between school and parents was one of partnership, rather than simply the parents ‘supporting’ the school. One parent clearly articulated her changed perception of her role:

I used to think my part was just sending him to school. It was ‘him and the teacher.’ Now I see I have to work hand in hand with him and the teacher.

while another recognised that through ‘allowing the ideas in ... the learning continues.’

As the participants grew in confidence, they felt better able to see that their parenting programme needed to draw on local knowledge coupled with ‘outside’ knowledge. Sharing their own knowledge became an important feature of meetings; local knowledge became increasingly acknowledged and articulated. One young parent explained how she had tapped into the knowledge and experience of the participant group, explaining how ‘in this project, I got the wisdom of the older parents, and helped me grow up.’

As academics, we had brought what we call facilitative and process-based knowledge to the project, running pre-project events to help self-affirmation and meet their identified needs for skills development and workshop management skills, such as listening and respecting. The participants initially felt unskilled in these areas, lacking knowledge and confidence. It took time before some were confident enough to fully participate in discussions. However, slowly their increasing confidence in their ability to participate, and their confidence in the ability of the community to solve its own problems, was evident in a number of ways. We observed, for example, that one participant, a young woman who initially had felt unable to speak in the group during meetings, became increasingly vocal and articulate. Participants told us in focus groups that because they had been made to feel comfortable, they felt more confident to speak, and the ‘use of paper to explain [often through drawing] our characteristics’ helped build confidence. They discussed their local stories, and the ways in which these could be used to help their own children in the development of life skills. One participant identified that the use of stories ‘gives me insight into how to communicate.’ Her realisation that knowledge could be built through dialogue has encouraged better communication in her own family, where weekly family meetings have been introduced, and also in her role as a TA, in communicating with the schoolchildren and their families: ‘I am now learning new things, engaging with parents.’ They also recognised the role of their community in contributing to the education of children and production of knowledge.

You don’t have to be a qualified teacher to be able to teach others. Education is a continuum, and is everyone’s responsibility – back to the saying that it takes a community to raise a child.

This was an important part of the project, and a hoped-for outcome. To quote Freire (1990 in Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990:145–146),

[t]he more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people

participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and for why, the more the people participate in the development of their selves.

Thus, facilitative and process-based knowledge brought to the project by us, as academics, was directly complemented by the knowledge of local community members giving value and status to each knowledge base. This resonates with Latour's (1987, 1988) concept that our world is one of many practices and knowledges, where some are 'scientific' and some are local. In extending this concept to not only acknowledge the validity of different knowledge bases, but to combine them in a unique and powerful way to produce new knowledge, we argue that knowledge is not always epistemologically 'clean.' To quote Biesta (2007:476), in following Dewey's notion of transactional realism, we have been able to "legitimately raise questions about the relationships between different knowledges and views of the world, the scientific being one of them."

Structural and epistemological democracy

There was evidence of developing epistemological democracy during the project. Here we discuss structural and epistemological enablers that we identified in analysing the data sets. Education is not a neutral process. In situations (such as in this project) where it is explicitly activist in intent, pedagogical structures are key in achieving epistemological democracy. These pedagogical structures and processes disrupt what Latour (1987) calls asymmetries between 'science' and 'everyday life,' mirrored in this project by 'university' knowledge and 'local' knowledge, respectively. In the PAR approach, where participants evolved into co-researchers, we were able to enact a process through which "[k]nowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 2005:72). In this way, our democratic structures and processes were integral to epistemological democracy.

Our start-up sessions with the TAs modelled processes of questioning and self-reflection, where we hoped these would enable them to use a similar pedagogy in their community work. As the project progressed and participants undertook more of its management, they grew in personal confidence, as well as in confidence in their community. Their own knowledge of their community and its circumstances began to guide them in their choice of content for the manual. Having identified that they had specific knowledge of the community, they began to understand better the community's needs and strengths. The ways in which they organised their meetings, talking about everyday problems and discussing them openly with other members of the community, were new to them, but

they became significant. For many this was an important source of personal help, as well as something they could then pass on to help others.

There were many examples of this emerging voice and sense of agency:

I used to think that things could not be changed. [Now] you can see that things can be better for your child. You have hope.

In particular, strategies for shared communication that we had introduced enabled participants to talk more openly with each other and with their families.

Now I have a good relationship with my kids. We sit down and talk. I'm grateful to be part of this. It has grown me a lot.

There was also evidence that the group of TAs had developed a much greater understanding of the underlying causes of difficulties in their community, and they felt better equipped to help their community deal with them:

Unemployment can shut people down. They can't think of anything, can't even move. But I have achieved something by giving my time [...] by just giving myself and being part of this community. Offer yourself and your time. The ideas are uplifting.

Furthermore, they were realising the wider implications of their new knowledge and understanding and seeing how structural change at school and community level could benefit all:

I wish that all the community schools would realise what is the biggest role of the community. Teachers are employed to assist the kids. By allowing the community to take part, it lessens the workload.

They strongly believed in their self-determination, indicating that they were 'part of the decision-making in the project,' and the 'steering wheels of the project.' This sense of agency was particularly notable in one of the later meetings, where a TA suggested that they should tell the school principal to change practice in relation to communicating with parents. If parents find it difficult, or are embarrassed (through ignorance or personal circumstances), to contact the school, the onus should be on the school to open communication channels. Perhaps, they suggested, a homework diary could be supplied? As the participants explained in one of the later meetings, 'we need to talk to the head teacher and explain that communication with the parents could maybe be better organised and initiated by the school' (near verbatim).

This change in confidence in the participants, could also be seen as an emerging change in identity, embracing both the local and the educational communities in a new hybridity. Bhabha (1994:23) suggests that this hybridity is a result of an "interaction between the indigenous and colonial culture." It is also the case, that in reflecting on past behaviours and 'ways of being' (for both participants and researchers), considering them in the light of a newly emerging context, both

participants and researchers had undergone a transformation similar to that Bhabha (1990:216) describes as possible “when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself ... [and] may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them.” We had all experienced a transformation of identity that resonates with what Rushdie (1991:15) calls the ‘migrant condition,’ with both plural and partial identities. “Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (Rushdie 1991:15). This seemed to be an occasion where we could all straddle the two cultures. In order to preserve the ability to straddle, rather than fall between, it was important to maintain a dialogic process throughout.

Problem-posing rather than transmission pedagogies, in the words of Freire (2005:81), “strive[s] for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality.” Such an approach also changes the structural premise of the relationships, reducing their asymmetry. Our approach throughout this project was to support dialogue and participation. We strove to reduce perceived power hierarchies which might be structural inhibitors, by adopting facilitative, rather than “teaching,” modes, allowing the group to determine its own path. Strier (2011:83) suggests that mutuality in such partnerships is the ‘optimum goal,’ in that it incentivises both parties, allowing the “construction of shared meanings” as a basic condition for social action (Strier, 2011:94). It further acknowledges and celebrates the hybridity of our identities as we undertake research in such partnerships.

This, in turn, became a point of learning for us, as we deepened our understanding of the needs of the community and its located knowledge. The pedagogical reciprocity that the TAs experienced in the project was, we argue, a significant part of this structural transformation. As academics leading the process, we were best placed to introduce process-based pedagogies, in order to support engagement with the project. However, the participants themselves brought local content and knowledge to the project, which shaped the way in which it both operated and developed. From the outset, we had made it clear that this was not ‘our’ project; our role was to help and support their work in any way we could. Our pedagogical processes were designed not to organise their work, but to provide circumstances in which they could use their own knowledge to make their own decisions. Assaf, Ralfe and Steinbach (2016:175) describe this type of knowledge as “generative knowledge, which consists of professional knowledge, personal knowledge, and knowledge gained from students.” As Van Laren, Mudaly, Pithouse-Morgan and Singh (2013) suggest, participatory processes that are generative lead to improved well-being. Our light-touch management of the process resonates

with the cautionary note of Horton, who, in conversation with Freire (Bell et al. 1990:120), warns against over-organising educational projects, “thinking that it’s empowerment;” he adds that quite often this approach “*disempower[s]* people in the process by using experts to tell them what to do.”

Conclusion

We have explored two separate concepts of the civic university in our project. One model operates as benevolent ‘gifting’ of high-status knowledge from the university, to those with a perceived deficiency. This is similar to Freire’s (2005) pedagogy of ‘banking,’ where knowledge is transmitted to students, who are not expected to question it. He suggests that this process minimises, or even annuls, creativity and critical thought; thus, it becomes a pedagogy of oppression. Citing De Beauvoir (1963:34), he suggests that “changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them, serves the interests of the oppressor.”

The second model is one of democratic participation. Freire (2005:79) argues that humanist, revolutionary educators must have profound trust for people and their creative power, and must therefore advocate partner-based relationships between teacher and student. If we strive for liberatory education, then our educational process must focus on “posing [of] the problems of human beings in their relations with the world.” Arguably, what we, as researchers, have tried to achieve with participants as they became fully-fledged co-researchers was a more engaged and democratic scholarship. Further, in allowing such epistemic democracy, we were supporting the development of what Perry (1970) describes as ‘constructed knowledge,’ recognising the potential for shared meaning-making from our multiple perspectives. In integrating other knowledge perspectives into our own epistemic frameworks, rather than simply setting up procedures for the transfer of knowledge from ‘experts’ to ‘participants’ and in sharing our reflections on this process, we were growing both as individuals, and as a collective group. We were also explicitly acknowledging the worth of each knowledge source, and thus validating the indigenous knowledge of the community.

In an earlier publication, we reported on the challenge that we had faced in realising that despite the ‘powerful’ positions we enjoyed, we were, in fact, often powerless in the operation of the project, dependent on participants undertaking the journey as co-researchers, or not. In this article, we aimed to explore the ways in which the design and operation of the project enabled changes in knowledge-generation processes, and their supporting democratic structures. Many projects

undertaken in impoverished communities ‘import’ outside expertise, replicating colonising approaches of previous times. Biesta (2007:478) calls this transmission of ‘expert’ knowledge the ‘knowledge economy.’ While this is not to be totally disregarded – technical/scientific knowledge is an important part of the global economy – he stresses the importance of “knowledge democracy as one of the crucial dimensions of the knowledge society, so [...] that the knowledge society will never be reduced to the knowledge economy.” It is hoped that our account shows one way in which the civic role of the university can support the decolonising and democratisation of knowledge. Furthermore, it reminds us of the implications of adopting this type of model, which speaks directly to our understanding of research and scholarship, and its place in society and the academy. Brown-Luthango (2013:309) suggests that “truly engaged scholarship requires a significant transformation of the institutional context within universities [...] to not only facilitate and support, but also reward research which seek closer collaboration between universities and communities.” As university-based researchers working on such projects, we need to be a voice in our own universities and beyond for systemic, institutional change which recognises the value of such research and its resultant new knowledge.

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Note

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