Institutionalising service-learning

Amanda Hlengwa - Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Higher education has three core pillars: teaching, research and community engagement. Teaching and research endeavours have dominated university agendas. However, momentum in prioritising community engagement is growing. The developing emphasis placed on the third pillar raises an opportunity to investigate how community engagement is conceptualised and therefore prioritised within the higher education landscape. Community engagement is expressed as a continuum in higher education inclusive of five overlapping activities of which service-learning is just one. This paper outlines what service-learning is and its potential role in the transformation of higher education, as well as to signal the importance of institutional commitment to service-learning. Lastly, the paper offers a synthesis of the available literature on how to implement successfully service-learning modules.

INTRODUCTION

Transformation and social responsiveness are challenges with which Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) grapple, driven in part by the demands of globalisation. The 1997 White Paper describes globalisation as referring to 'multiple, inter-related changes in social, cultural and economic relations, linked to widespread impact of the information and communications revolution, the growth of trans-national scholarly and scientific networks, the accelerating integration of the world economy and intense competition among nations for markets' (DoE, 1997: 9). In this globalised environment the traditional functions and responsibilities of universities are in danger of being narrowed down to 'increasingly being located within the demands of economic productivity and its requirements for particular kinds of knowledge and skills' (Singh, 2001: 8). Singh argues for a broader understanding and for the thorough conceptualisation of social responsiveness.

One indicator of transformation in higher education is for universities to produce graduates whose proficiency is not locked within the discipline: '[h]igher education has a role to prepare people to go beyond the present and be able to respond to a future which cannot be imagined' (Waghid, 2002: 459). To achieve the mandate of a broadened transformation agenda, Singh (2001: 15) and Calhoun (cited in Singh) propose the re-insertion of 'public good' as a focus in higher education. The achievement of the public good requires a deeper inquiry into 'the ways in which the core activities of higher education (teaching, research and community service) could yield public good benefits' (Singh, 2001: 9). The debate around the re-insertion of the 'public good' has resulted in more focused attention on community engagement activities, such as service-learning in higher education curricula.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A perusal of HEIs' mission statements reveals that these often encompass the notion of engaging with communities, however noticeable emphasis is placed on teaching and research endeavours (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000: 273). HEIs have various ways of interpreting, responding to, and indeed prioritising, service. Boyer felicitously argues for a scholarship of engagement through which the academic endeavour can be changed, student learning enhanced, and the relationship between the university and its community can be strengthened to ensure the university fulfils its mission and vision (Boyer, 1994: 18).

The differentiated response of universities to community engagement can be linked to the primary educational mission of the institution; in other words, the institution classification and identity impacts on how it chooses to conceptualise community engagement (Pollack, 1999).

Figure 1
Typology of Institutional Response to Community Engagement

Type	Primary Educational Mission	Concept of Community Engagement
Liberal Arts Institutions	Citizenship training for democracy, character formation	Engaging with ideas of value, training citizens for public life
Research Institutions	Expanding the knowledge base	Applying knowledge to solve social problems
Professional Institutions (Universities of Technikons)	Teaching applied concrete skills	Training professionals to perform needed social functions, clinical training
Private Institutions[3]	Demand-absorption driven, career-vocationally-oriented education	Access to educational opportunity and employment opportunities

(Adapted from Pollack, 1999)

In a typical liberal arts institution the predilection is to concentrate on universal quests which disassociate from the issues of daily life, 'education and the pursuit of truth is seen as service in and of itself' (Pollack, 1999: 15). Teaching, in such institutions, is often prioritised over research and community engagement. While we do not have such institutions in South Africa, some of the general degree offerings within traditional universities might be considered to fall within this category. On the other hand, research institutions often conceptualise community engagement in the primary role of knowledge creation and application; which in turn places research endeavours higher on the priority list.

The priority for professional institutions is to 'fulfil public service mission...see the development and application of professional skills as the basis of their service of the community' (Pollack, 1999: 16-17). In order to graduate successfully, students enrolled in professional institutions are often required to demonstrate the application of their professional skills *pro bono* thus moving closer to Boyer's (1997) engaged scholarship.

3   In Pollack's original table this category refers to an institutional type best suited for the American context. This category has been amended to fit the South African context.

Private institutions fulfil the national demand for intermediate, middle level education and training (Kraak, 2002). Institutions in this category consider providing higher learning and professional training as the basis of their community engagement (Pollack, 1999).

Each institution's understanding of community engagement is related not only to type but also to organisational capacities, which impact on how the institution responds to and resolves the tension of balancing the focus of the three pillars of knowledge production (research), knowledge dissemination (teaching) and knowledge application (community engagement). In the South African context community engagement has an exigent role to transform higher education in order to become more socially responsive. There is thus a national imperative that HEIs visibly commit to this endeavour.

Community engagement comprises five activities within a continuum. Figure 2 below is a diagrammatic representation of this continuum. The diagram also signals the blurred divisions between the different engagements indicating that academic modules may shift along the continuum according to the academic outcomes of the course.

Figure 2[4]
Distinctions among Community Engagement Activities

(Adapted from Furco, 1996)
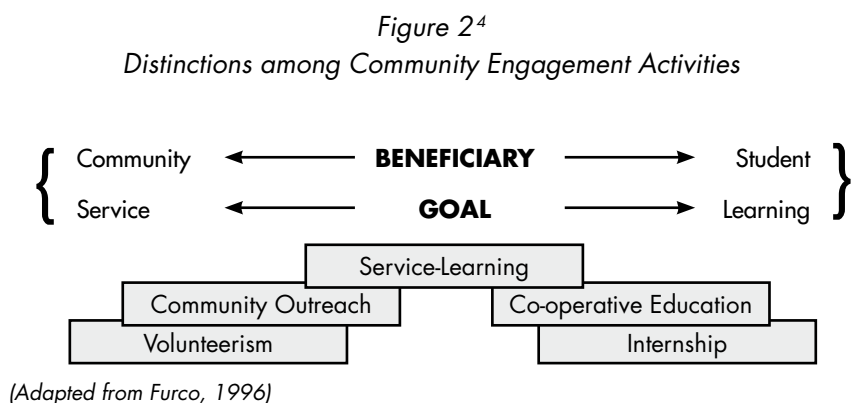
The community engagement activities on the right hand side of the continuum are regarded as experiential learning activities. These activities provide co-curricular opportunities related to the field of study either fully integrated in the curriculum as can be expected in Internships or less integration as in Co-operative Education. The community engagement activities on the left hand side of the continuum are generally altruistic, extra-curricula activities neither necessarily related to, nor integrated into, the field of study. The distinction of whether an activity in the continuum is related to the academic project is significant; it legitimises community engagement as part of the academic project.

Figure 2 illustrates the ideal positioning of the fifth activity in the continuum. Service-learning, in the middle of the continuum, strikes a balance between 'service', which occurs in the community, and 'learning', which is thought to be the domain of the university.

SERVICE-LEARNING

South African universities experience pressure from the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2006), which recommends that service-learning be seen as part of a new social contract between the university and society, 'service-learning is entrenched in a discourse that proposes the development and transformation of higher education in relation to community needs' (CHE, 2006: 123). The emphasis that the CHE bestows on service-learning can be traced to the accusation, experienced at an international level, that higher education is not socially responsive: 'Higher Education has not succeeded in laying the foundations of

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4   Reference to this diagram can also be sourced in CHE (2006: 21).

a critical civil society with a culture of tolerance, public debate and accommodation of difference and competing interests. Nor has it contributed significantly to a democratic ethos and a sense of citizenship perceived as commitment to a common good. There is inadequate consideration of and response to the needs of our society' (DoE, 1996: 2).

Despite the call for such initiatives at a national level, 'service-learning' is a contested term. It is therefore helpful to frame the understanding of the term in the context of this paper. The contestation is evident in the various definitions and terminology claiming to describe the same learning activity. On careful examination it can be seen that the variants indicate different emphases, an example of this is the terms 'academic service-learning' and 'community service-learning'. To create a balanced focus, the term 'service-learning' is hyphenated to illustrate a balance as well as an interrelationship between service and learning (Furco, 1996: 2-3). Through this interrelationship there is both a kind of *service* and a kind of *learning* (CHE, 2006: 21).

Bringle and Hatcher's preferred definition outlines the main principles of service-learning as 'a credit bearing, educational, experience, in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility' (1995: 112). More recently, service-learning was described by Ash and Clayton as 'a collaborative teaching and learning strategy designed to promote academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement' (2004: 138). Through thoughtfully organised activities, students proffer meaningful service in community settings that provide experiences related to academic material. The quality of the service and learning is enhanced by compelling students to examine critically their experiences through reflection (Ash and Clayton, 2004: 138). Service-learning champions regard it as a transformative pedagogical tool, with the potential to contribute significantly to the call for higher education to swing the pendulum so that there is a balance between 'ivory tower' deliberations and engagement with societal issues, thereby showing a more visible measure of social responsiveness (Singh, 2001: 11).

Service-learning courses link academic learning, community service experiences, and learning explicitly related to service. Service-learning is infused into courses to enrich the understanding of course content, broaden appreciation of the discipline, provide opportunities for practical application and enhance development of democratic citizenship. Impetus for lecturers to implement service-learning are the increased opportunities not only to enrich teaching and integrate service, but also to design research to improve future learning and service outcomes. Service-learning modules involve students in organised community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of social responsiveness and commitment to the community.

The paper has so far broadly discussed the role of the community engagement continuum in higher education and then specifically conceptualised service-learning within that continuum. The focus diverts from theoretical underpinnings to practical considerations of design, implementation and sustainability of service-learning modules in institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Before considering the nuts and bolts of designing, implementing and sustaining service-learning modules there is value in pausing to examine the significance of institutional commitment which the literature argues as a key factor for growth and sustainability of these modules in higher education (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000; Holland, 1997, 1999; Lynton 1995; Lynton and Elman, 1987; Ward, 1996; Zlotkowski, 1995).

Institutional changes that support the scholarship of engagement include: intentionally clarifying mission in a manner that produces increased congruence between the mission and practice; examining how the curriculum can better reflect community engagement; investing in infrastructure that supports community engagement; developing new models for assessing successful engagement in the community; and adjusting the roles and rewards of faculty so that faculty work in the community is recognised and supported (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000: 274).

Figure 3
Institutionalisation of service-learning

Essentially the argument is for the third pillar of higher education to have equivalent status to teaching and research. Identifying aspects of the mission statement that reveal how community engagement is conceptualised in the institution is a starting point. A relevant question to ask is: how is the mission statement supported by the curriculum processes in the institution? Structures and mechanisms for recognising lecturers successfully implementing these modules as well as adequate resourcing are imperatives that cannot be ignored in mainstreaming service-learning in the institution.

In order for service-learning to become an institutionalised component of higher education, institutions need to develop strategies that bring together the input from various stakeholders, such as academic staff, students and community partners in a way that ensures that 'their involvement in service-learning is sustained as a meaningful part of their long-term interest' (Bringle, Hatcher and Games, 1997: 45). In a study commissioned by Campus Compact[5] to ascertain the requirements for successful institutionalisation of service-learning, researchers Morton and Troppe (1996: 26) indicate that the following make institutionalisation likely:

- Congruence exists between institutional mission and strategic planning. This involves institutions developing an understanding of the degree to which service-learning is an integral component of the academic enterprise.
- Broad acceptance of the need for long-range planning and allocation of resources to support service-learning. For service-learning to be mainstreamed in the institution it is imperative that is part of the annual budget.

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5   Campus Compact was founded in 1985. It is a coalition of United States College and University Vice Chancellors committed to fulfilling the public purposes for higher education.

- Faculty are central to planning. This entails academic staff being involved in designing and implementing service-learning modules as well as there being broad understanding and support of service-learning right through the various institutional structures.

- Incentives are provided to faculty. Using service-learning as a pedagogic tool initially takes a lot of time in planning, therefore incentives such as course development stipends in the form of release time are beneficial. Official recognition of service-learning scholarship in retention, tenure and personal promotion procedures ameliorates the status of service-learning in the institution.

- Faculty work is widely publicised. Traditional academic publications are important in theorising service-learning and ensuring its credibility in the educational environment. However publicising service-learning activity through institutional and local media is advantageous in reaching a wider and more diverse audience.

- Campus plans for integrating community engagement into academic study evolve over time and across personnel. An important factor to consider is accompanying the strategic plan for service-learning guided by the mission of the institution with well developed evaluation mechanisms designed to monitor and thus co-ordinate all community engagement activities.

Additional positive factors mentioned in similar studies identify ringfenced funding and the appointment of staff to spearhead service-learning (Ward, 1996) as well as a focus on institutional policies regarding service-learning (Lyton, 1995). Perhaps more radical is Zlotkowski's assertion, which requires institutional cultural to transform from 'a set of elitist, self-referential academic assumptions' (1995: 130).

WHAT CONSTITUTES A SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE?

Service-learning courses are embedded within a curriculum programme where students are engaged in direct or indirect service to the chosen community site. Direct service provides opportunities for students to interact face-to-face with members of the community site in which they are placed. Examples are tutoring or mentoring high school learners in identified academic subjects or providing legal/medical/accounting expertise to identified indigent members associated with a Non-Profit Organisation. Indirect service involves students in a project with a focus on the impact of a community as a whole. An example is a project where students considered issues related to a rapid increase in demand for additional residential accommodation in a small town. The students collected data regarding the impact of this phenomenon, made recommendations to solve the problem and submitted these suggestions and solutions to municipal authorities.

In a discipline-based course, students have a presence in the community and complete assignments or participate in discussions that connect the classroom learning with the service activity. For example, in a Pharmacy course students were required to complete the Community Experience Module. Students interviewed and assisted patients from public health care facilities who had prevalent conditions like Asthma, Hypertension, and Diabetes. The interviews involved asking patients about their conditions and how these affect their lives. The students then educated the patients about their conditions, accurate and consistent dosage and healthy lifestyle habits. The experience gained in this module gave students insight into the socio-economic factors that often correlate with risky health behaviours.

Students in a project-based service-learning course use knowledge gained in the courses to work on a mutually identified community problem or need. The specific service-learning activity in a project-based course is not likely to be repeated. The partnership between the academic department and the community partner may continue with different problems each year. An example would be the local tourism office partnering up with Marketing students to develop and roll out a campaign geared towards mobilising volunteers for 2010 Soccer World Cup.

Developing service-learning modules requires time and effort; it helps to be guided by a model. The model presented is developed through a synthesis of the literature available, which is largely based on Eyler and Giles's influential 'Where's the learning in service-learning?' (1999). The elements discussed below are presented in a linear fashion. However the lecturer's contextual factors will determine in which order they are followed in reality.

Service-learning course development model

An effective service-learning course should include the following core elements:

- Connection to academic learning
- Analysis of the connection between academic content and service
- Student preparation and support
- Assessment and evaluation
- Sustainability.

Connection to academic learning

Conceptualising a service-learning module requires careful thought and a number of steps. The service activity must be connected to classroom learning and theory, and the selected community sites must be connected to course objectives and learning outcomes. The service enhances understanding of the academic content of the course and leads students to apply academic learning in a community setting. 'One of the main benefits of service-learning is its ability to expand student learning beyond [the] typical objective into a new range of learning outcomes that blend academic study with civic engagement and awareness, as well as practical experience' (Rubin, 2001: 18).

The service activity is designed with clear goals, expectations, and responsibilities for the lecturer, the students enrolled in the course and the community partner. There are clearly established lines of communication that allow for all groups to provide feedback about the service activity. A set of statements concerning the goals of the service, expectations and responsibilities for the lecturer, students and community partners is an essential component. These statements are derived from ongoing conversations and the development of mutual understanding and appreciation for differences in culture and practice within the partnership between the lecturer, students and community partners. Ideally in a joint effort the lecturer and the community partner develop a plan for service activity which focuses on how students will be able to engage meaningfully with the academic content of the course whilst meeting the community's priorities. The students will need class activities and assignments to assist them in making the connection between course content and in applying academic content to service activity.

Analysis of the connection between academic content and service

The learning experience includes structured time for students and community participants to reflect on and analyse the service experience. Providing structured discussions and/or assignments leading students in reflection of the service fosters student ability to connect the service to content and, conversely, to apply the content to the service experience. Reflection may be accomplished through a variety of approaches; including reflective journals (open ended or responding to questions), formal writing assignments, debriefing sessions soon after service experience, classroom discussions, electronic threaded discussions using learning management systems, examination questions, and final projects.

Student preparation and support

As part of the course plan students should be adequately prepared for the on-site activity, whether in class or through a learning management system. The course plan should include a description of the

activity, safety, time allocation, schedule, cultural sensitivity, understanding of and training for the tasks and approaches involved, and introduction to the work of the community partner.

In a well-structured service-learning course students are orientated to the responsibilities and issues related to service as well as an orientation into the community organisation(s) with which they will be working. Students may be introduced to people, issues, and communities with whom they are unfamiliar; they may be asked to confront and address previous stereotypes and biases. Good intentions alone are not enough to ensure that students approach new environments with respect and courtesy for those with whom they may come into contact. The following pointers are therefore helpful in preparing students for meaningful on-site activity:

- Clearly explain to the students the unique features of a service-learning course and how the service component fits into the course expectations.
- Help students gain a better appreciation for diversity and treating people who are different from themselves with respect is an important aspect of service-learning courses.
- Discuss the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of sensitive information that students might learn about the community partners.
- Students should be made aware that the community partners rely on students' service hours to help meet their needs. Students should be reminded that they must be dependable and provide the community partner with sufficient notice if they will not be able to make their scheduled commitments. This is an opportunity for students to learn values and professional ethics that might not be covered in a typical class.

Student support and monitoring of student participation should continue on a regular basis throughout the module. This can be facilitated through the reflection opportunities mentioned earlier.

Assessment and evaluation

A service-learning class, like any other class, needs an assessment and evaluation plan. Occasionally these two concepts are confused or conflated; both have important yet different roles to play in teaching and learning. Assessment focuses specifically on student action whereas evaluation encompasses the whole module, course or programme. 'Assessment consists, essentially, of taking a sample of what students do, making inferences and estimating the worth of their actions' (Brown *et al*, 1997: 8). In a service-learning module assessing whether learning outcomes are met is standard. In addition, how students' attitudinal and behavioural changes relate to the outcomes can be measured through a variety of pre- and post-course tools, such as Likert scales. Comparing pre- and post- responses to statements designed to measure behaviour can measures student progress.

Evaluation entails systematically collecting and reviewing information from all stakeholders, students, the community sites and lecturers involved in the service-learning module. Specific forms can be designed for each stakeholder group to gain important information. These can be in the form of pre- and post- surveys, which provide useful information for measuring course effectiveness and enhancing the quality of the service-learning experience.

The following components related to evaluating the service-learning module are important to consider:

- Evaluation of student performance in the service activity should be specified.
- The evaluation should measure the progress made towards meeting the learning and service goals of the course and demonstration of learning based on ability to connect service experience with course content.

- Evaluation should also include the extent to which the deliverables or project goals committed to are met.

Sustainability

Sustainability in service-learning refers to a number of aspects such as timing and duration which entails designing regular scheduled activities continuing throughout the duration of the module. Clear communication regarding the length of the partnership between the department and the community partner needs to be established (needs of the community partner are a factor). Regular and frequent student and lecturer interaction should be specified. Ultimately an indication of long-term sustainability is commitment from the department to offer the service-learning course on an annual basis.

CONCLUSION

Community engagement activities such as service-learning have a vital role to play in the transformation of higher education institutions. Continuing on the path of meagre emphasis on community engagement will result in an ineffectual higher education system which fails to respond to our society's exigent challenges. To guard against this, institutions need to institutionalise community engagement activities such as service-learning. For service-learning to be integrated successfully, it needs to be aligned to the institution's mission statement. Therefore the required prioritising and resourcing can support and legitimise the work undertaken within the institution.

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