



Ahmed Bawa is a Higher Education Programme Officer at the Ford Foundation in its Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom Programme. He is based in the Foundation's Johannesburg Office in South Africa. Prior to this he worked as Academic Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Natal in South Africa. He is a theoretical physicist by training.

Rethinking Community-Based Learning in the Context of Globalisation

AHMED C BAWA

SUMMARY

There is an extremely rich history of community-based learning at universities and colleges in many parts of the world, and most mission statements of institutions now carry some statement committing themselves to this kind of initiative. One example of such learning is linked to service – in which students are placed in communities and other integrative settings to work and to learn. In this chapter it is argued that while this kind of activity has enhanced and enriched the learning of students, a new set of local and global contexts prompt closer enquiry into the basis on which these initiatives are established. New dynamics may offer the opportunity for new approaches to be contemplated.

Foremost among these new dynamics are three factors: rapid globalisation that impacts directly on the wellbeing of

communities, the emergence of the 'knowledge society' in which the heightened role of knowledge in social and industrial processes is witnessed, and the explosion of information technologies which has revolutionised access to information and the rate and effectiveness of communication. The chapter argues that these phenomena impel a new conceptualisation of service – and community-based learning more generally. This could lead to the striking of learning partnerships between universities and communities that are deliberately shaped to make communities active participants in knowledge activities – in its creation, dissemination and utilisation. In turn, this kind of conceptual work could offer key insights into knowledge production processes, particularly in view of the fact that universities might have to deal with different 'knowledges'.

Such a project could provide the opportunity for the re-envisioning and re-invention of the public good of higher education. In particular, it could reshape understanding of how higher education should be funded. These processes raise questions about the nature of universities and about their role in a context in which their partial hegemony of the knowledge terrain suffers erosion as a consequence of the increased diffusion of knowledge processes into society. The chapter concludes that this kind of rethinking of community-based learning could thus provide an interesting window through which to interrogate the nature of the relationship between university and society in the context of phenomenally rapid change.

Introduction

There has been an extremely vibrant debate internationally on the role of higher education in society, both as a sector and as a part of what might be called national systems of innovation. University-initiated community activities and service learning have always been on policy development agendas¹ – mainly because they were seen as critical mechanisms to address the enormous transformation challenges confronting the higher education sector.

There is a richly textured set of histories² with regard to outreach, community service, service learning, or extension. In South Africa much of this emerged as a vital component of the struggle for social justice, human dignity and political freedom. Practices of this sort were later influenced by the external challenges of reconstruction and development in the post-apartheid era. Internally, as in other national contexts, these activities were shaped in complex ways by the particular challenges and demands facing institutions – for relevance, for various kinds of connectedness and transformation. And so they manoeuvred themselves into new spaces in the face of significantly changed and changing social, political and economic worldviews.

These convolutions have produced and continue to produce a wide variety of models of higher education engagement with the needs of communities – as various audits have shown – even in a single institution. This range of models and activities form part of the fascinating set of histories which are also shaped by the macro conditions of dominant socio-political contexts. This chapter argues that new global and local conditions impel the need to consider more radical approaches to higher education-initiated community-based learning.

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New global contexts

New global and regional contexts are beginning to shape ways in which the development of poor nations and regions are being discussed. Manuel Castells' depiction of Africa as the 'fourth world' (Castells 1996) – one which is severely delinked from the 'networked', globalising world – provides one perspective on the nature of these contexts. What are the new global contexts? The first is the phenomenon of globalisation and a new world order that has re-shaped the way in which the political and economic maps of the world are drawn. The second is the rise of the network society that is characterised by the rapid development of new innovations in information technologies, and their deployment, on the one hand, in production processes, and on the other, in the communications industry. The third is the emergence of the knowledge society – a new organisation of the processes of production in which the high-value end of the industrial systems of the world are dependent on the production of new knowledge and its rapid, value-adding infusion

into new products. The last of these has brought into being a significant international debate about the role of the university in society.

Alongside these global shifts, there are a host of regional shifts that represent a range of governmental responses to global challenges. One is President Thabo Mbeki's revival of the notion of an African Renaissance; another is the development of the idea of an African Union (AU) of nations. Both are designed to provide African governments with a way of interacting with the globalising world. These continental movements are underpinned by two sets of large projects. The first of these are the responses to the political economy challenges facing the continent – as represented, for example, in the approaches contained in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). And the second are the projects that focus on issues of identity and citizenship – for instance, what is meant by 'African' in the African Renaissance and in the African Union.

Other developments centre on the democratisation processes that are unfolding across the continent. These have important consequences and present opportunities for strengthening civil society organisations and their role in entrenching democracy and a culture of human rights. All of this is occurring in the context of the continuing challenges of poverty reduction, the quest for peace and the campaigns at national and regional levels for the emergence of sustainable development strategies.

It is the confluence of these global, continental and national developments that set the stage for a new discussion about the role of community-based learning – a

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key example of which is service. The importance of 'service', as an example, is that it emphasises the centrality of learning – both for civil society organisations and for higher education students. Further, it requires the integration of this particular form of learning into the paradigm of development. The space created by the unfolding of the African Union and NEPAD is empowering to national governments and to the organised private sector in the developing nations of Africa. But these initiatives do not provide a mechanism for the active participation of communities and the organisations of civil society in the new, hegemonic discourses on development. The key issue that this chapter attempts to explore is the role of community-based learning as a means to enable new community voices to be raised within those discourses, and in whatever local form they take. Since the unfolding of the knowledge society is a key factor shaping the discussion of development, it is necessary to address

this matter through an exploration of the *knowledge flows* in community-based learning. In particular it is necessary to assess whether these may be reshaped in such a way as to begin to enable the political empowerment of communities so as to foster their entry into the knowledge era on their own terms, as knowledge producers and users.

The reinsertion of the public good into higher education

What are the challenges facing higher education institutions and systems in the 21st century? The global roots of these challenges lie in three major issues. The first is the rate at which new knowledge is produced. The second is the increasing rapidity with which knowledge and information are infused into production and service industry processes. The third is the increased diffusion of knowledge generation and knowledge dissemination into society, particularly into the private sector. Amongst other things, these are manifestations of the growing commodification of knowledge which is evident in a variety of forms. The rate at which this phenomenon occurs can be measured, for example, by the rate of emergence of for-profit private sector higher education vendors of various kinds. Another manifestation is the blurring of the university-private sector interfaces through the development of a variety of strategic partnerships including the emergence of the 'kept' university. A symptom of this is the way in which universities have begun to re-shape the contracts of academic staff to accommodate their participation in joint university-private sector appointments – and it will be important to track the implications of this for teaching and research. Each of these issues points to ways in which universities attempt to reposition themselves to come to grips with the implications of the 'knowledge era'. In particular, there is a clearly defined challenge to the place and the space of 'the public good' in higher education as it does battle with powerful economic forces in society.

Local challenges are folded into these global ones, and are characterised by a continued focus on access and equity, quality, the relevance of the university in development and issues around effectiveness and efficiency – issues articulated within neo-liberal frameworks.

The growing impetus of these local and global influences has produced increasingly instrumentalist approaches to higher education – in terms of the research and teaching/learning activities of the sector. In South Africa, these approaches have been sponsored and are shaped by macro-economic policy and have taken root in the Higher Education Act and various other legal instruments in the areas of education, trade and industry, and science and technology.

An inevitable and interesting response to this commodification of higher education is a focus on the re-insertion of the public goods of higher education into the debate (see for example, Singh 2001). This important new addition to the debate is not about returning to the proverbial ivory tower, on the one hand, or capitulating to rampant instrumentalist notions, on the other. The core arguments take account of the context outlined above and centre on the role that higher education plays in developing broad-based national intellectual cultures, fostering good citizenship, and ensuring the vibrancy of national cultures. At the same time, higher education plays a role in facilitating the growth of national economies and in the achievement of other objectives, such as service delivery, policy creation and other activities which may be de-linked from the core activities of higher education.

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In this new context, spatial and temporal separations are widening and diminishing respectively. The wellbeing of communities is being determined at loci that are increasingly distant from the local while there is a genuine collapse in time lines. The only public institutions that reach across both space and time dimensions are universities. Their ability to do this, their public character, and their knowledge capacity identify them as the key institutional players in the project to allow local communities to find their place within the local and global under conditions that they control.

The nature of community-based activities

The matter of institutional alienation (see Dalfovo 1996) – represented by the disarticulation of higher education institutions from local contexts – has been a major driver for the establishment of community-based activities such as service. Hence, community-based work has had a tremendous boost in recent times as the higher education sector (institutionally and as a system) has sought ways to meet these different categories of challenge, to address the need for relevance, and so on. This has helped to shape the nature of the enterprise. With the risk of some simplification, these activities may be said to have focused on the following:

- They help to enhance the scope of learning of students by exposing them to the developmental issues facing communities. In particular, they ensure that the compartmentalised categories within which much university learning takes place come up against 'problems of the real world' that do not obligingly divide themselves into neat disciplines. The notion, however, that universities do not engage with the 'real world' except through these kinds of projects is dangerous. What physicist or engineer or actuarial scientist or anthropologist does not engage with the 'real world'? It is clearly risky to distinguish university-initiated community-based learning as distinct and different from what goes on at the centre of the university.
- They heighten student awareness of their role in society and thereby help in the national project of citizenship-development by integrating new generations of intellectuals into the national project.
- They provide an ideal opportunity for the very distinct left-brain learning paradigms that are dominant at most institutions – even the better ones – to be broadened to encompass right-brain learning and thereby promote more holistic approaches.

- They facilitate the community-based research activities of university-based intellectuals and thereby support communities in attempts to take on the developmental challenges facing them.
- They provide universities with what Richard Bawden (1992) called 'dynamic interfaces' in his analysis of the large variety of institutional structures that arose out of the community-based activities at the University of Natal and which provided it with a particular flavour and texture.

Underpinning much of this is a project to help place the universities and the sector as a whole in a new relationship with government, in which they can present themselves as active players in 'development'. The emphasis is mainly on the quality of learning, the relevance of research and the challenges of institutional and sectoral relevance – all of which are important projects. What is lacking is what might be referred to as 'unity in learning' – while learning occurs around particular projects, it is important to generate partnerships where the learning is also diverse and serves a variety of purposes giving rise to a diversity of 'knowledges'.

What is lacking is learning giving rise to a diversity of 'knowledges'

Perhaps the new context provides the impetus to have another look at community-based learning as a means to think about the nature of the engagement between higher education and civil society, and there are at least three reasons why this is the case. In articulating each of these reasons, some attention is paid to understanding how the national Community, Higher Education, Service Partnership (CHESP) project³ in South Africa addresses these issues.

- The first relates to renewed interest in the re-insertion of the public good of higher education into the discussion. This demands a re-evaluation of the definition of the public good – perhaps through a 'social contract' (Bawa 2001) that is struck with broad segments of society. It is argued here that one public good may well be the active penetration of the voices of communities and the organisations of civil society into globalisation discourses – voices which have as their frame of reference the development challenges that are central to them. The CHESP project helps to do this at the local level since it forces the three sectors – the participating communities, the university involved and the service provider (usually a local government department) – to strike up a partnership both in terms what needs to be done and how that is to be done. The lack of experience and capacity in the non-university partners, in most cases, has allowed the university partners to dominate this interaction.
- The second reason relates to knowledge – its production, its dissemination and infusion into the solution of problems – as the engine of the new evolution of societies. Castells (1996) has described knowledge as the electricity of the new industrial revolution. One of the pillars of the African Renaissance is the creation

of indigenous knowledge and its exploitation in the solution of problems. For communities the challenge is similar – individuals in communities must engage in the flows of knowledge. By this is meant their active participation in the creation of new knowledge, in the imbibing of existing knowledge, in its dissemination, and its infusion into problem-solving. CHESP has not paid particular attention to this. The main reason for this is that as a programme it builds largely (and very well) on traditional notions of the interaction referred to above.

- Thirdly, the explosion of the power of information technology has opened the way to new forms of knowledge flows – forms that were unthinkable just ten years ago. Without concerted efforts, developing societies and the communities within them are falling behind in the use of these technologies – and the chasm appears to be growing all the time. Community-based learning activities may bring to the development agenda the insertion of information technologies through which communities are empowered to communicate and to operate in the knowledge terrain themselves. CHESP has not addressed this matter in a direct and focused way. However, the Centre for Civil Society at the University of Natal runs a training programme for community activists and has a specific approach to this kind of intervention.

It is on the basis of these three challenges that a new conceptualisation of community-based learning is posited. Service learning is one manifestation of this intellectual project – as long as it is conceptualised in the context of genuine learning in both directions. In a very real sense, this is an opportunity to reflect on the nature of 'the university'. The key issue it seems, is to understand how to foreground the engagedness of these institutions of higher learning in a way that facilitates learning and the production of knowledge.

The knowledge issues

There has been a very substantial international debate about different modes of knowledge production and the way in which these impact on policy development. The work done by Gibbons et al (1994) indicates unambiguously that there are new and interesting features that have emerged in the knowledge terrain – even though there are contending views about the ways in which these are described by the Gibbons group. One of these new features is the increasing frequency of cases in which research projects are shaped in the context of applications rather than in the context of academic imperatives. The consequence (a second feature) is that research questions are increasingly shaped, and research performed, by transient teams of

experts that may include individuals with a sound understanding of the applications context. In industrial innovation this may involve private sector engineers and technicians and also sales people. In the case of policy analysis, the process may well include government officials and civil society organisers. Hence one begins to see a challenge to the pre-eminence of the academy in these kinds of research projects. Thirdly, there is the growing phenomenon of research being conducted at sites of application rather than in university laboratories. Fourthly, the nature of the research may be, in the words of Gibbons et al, trans-disciplinary instead of uni-disciplinary. Fifthly, the instruments of measurement may well be broader in form than those adopted in the usual 'Mode 1' type of research that is dominant at universities. They may include different forms of peer evaluation and, since the research design is applications-based, the outputs are evaluated in different ways. Sixthly, these kinds of research enterprises, if carefully constructed, provide for both the solution of applications-based problems and the furtherance of new knowledge – thereby defining new learning relationships between the academy and external knowledge systems.

The formulation of Gibbons et al arises out of knowledge production changes in the relationship between various European public research systems and private sector innovation systems. The formulation caught the imagination of South African policy researchers because it provided the opportunity for policy development that focused on the creation of systems that fostered socially relevant knowledge programmes. Subotzky (1998) asks 'how changing patterns of knowledge production can benefit the public good as well as private interests to which it is currently predominantly oriented.' The Mode 1/Mode 2 discussion provides a powerful opportunity to think creatively and systemically about the role of service learning. It does so because this form of learning always relates to complex contexts which open the way for such a discourse to emerge.

The growing importance of knowledge in production processes has resulted in a substantial diffusion of knowledge production into society – a diffusion that threatens the near hegemony of universities in this terrain. This has happened most powerfully in the private sector – in its laboratories, workshops and classrooms. Universities have responded to this in a variety of ways, one of which is the development of partnerships with other knowledge production organisations – such as government laboratories, private sector laboratories and non-governmental organisations. Subotzky's study of university-community partnership models in this context is very useful as it explores ways in which the contribution of the academy to the public good may be enhanced through its engagement with complex social problems in partnership models. The key element of such an engagement, as it relates to service learning, is that the latter must be tied to knowledge production in which both the university-based component and the community or civil society based component share responsibilities.

Some new ideas on university-initiated community-based learning

There are vast changes that have occurred in the relationship of universities with societies over the last twenty years. These changes demand the need for a radical review of the role of universities. This is highlighted by the challenge of defining the public and private goods of higher education in these new contexts. The primary argument presented here is that one of the public goods – often cited in missions of universities – is the need to empower communities and civil society. This chapter argues, however, that in addition to the traditional transfer matrices in such partnerships, the new contexts suggest that a key public good may well be the creation of knowledge partnerships that allow communities and civil society to exercise some influence in the globalisation debates. This has to be achieved through the engagement of communities and their organisations as primary participants in knowledge processes and knowledge systems. And this will have to be achieved at the same time as competence is developed and grown – both in terms of skills and in terms of broadening the base of participants – in the use of information technology. Service learning has a special role to play in this *if* it brings together 'learning partnerships'.

If this role is to be defined as a public good then one of the key challenges is to shift the locus of community-based learning from the edge of institutions into their core. In his wonderful analysis of the University of Natal's engagement with communities, Richard Bawden (1992) defines the 'dynamic interfaces' as being the locus where the university and its staff can be involved in what he calls the 'scholarship of engagement'. It also provides a clear insight into how even the most committed of institutions may find that these interfaces still occur only at the edges of the institution.

One of the key challenges is to shift the locus of community-based learning from the edge of institutions into their core

A knowledge-based, learning-based approach to service learning provides one interesting way in which to shift Bawden's dynamic interfaces into the heart of institutions of higher learning. A reasonable technique to achieve this would be to associate service learning with academic credit since this would force the faculty to take on the responsibility for the learning activity. However, the danger of this approach, as we have seen from the CHESP experiment, is that the curriculum discourse may easily be dominated by the university component in the partnership. Having recognised the potential for this problem, solutions may be found to resolve it. One obvious route to follow would be to create the dynamic interfaces 'inside' the university rather than on its 'edges'.

There are, however, deeply systemic issues that militate against the kind of re-conceptualisation that is called for in this chapter.

- The national funding systems for higher education see these kinds of activities as outside of the 'public good domain' and therefore do not fund them within core budgets. Universities, even the most committed ones, are obliged to support such scholarly engagements with 'soft' funding.
- Universities and the national systems of higher education are increasingly expected to operate within market-oriented approaches. This often militates against higher and deeper levels of 'scholarly engagement' through community-based learning, and hence the need to redefine what constitutes the 'public good'.
- None of the South African institutions have a formally instituted set of processes or structures within which debate about the nature of the public good can occur. For this reason the earlier call was made for a new social contract between higher education and the people that it serves – in all of their social formations. Much of the literature, including innovative experiments such as CHESP, speaks about the development of a culture of mutuality. Outside of a public good framework of this nature, the dominance of the pre-eminent knowledge institutions in society will always rise to the fore.

It needs to be added that the emergence of a culture of mutuality, shaped in a new public good framework, will also provide protection for institutions of higher education. It will be a way of ensuring that they do not slide into becoming agents of delivery in the place of government departments. Their engagement is about producing 'knowledges'.

There are two kinds of challenge in this proposed radicalisation. One is to come to an understanding of how universities are to interface with different and diverse 'knowledges'. They would be challenged to find ways in which the richness of such diversity adds value to the knowledge production processes at the heart of institutions, without sliding into obscurity. The second is about new missions to provide the opportunity for the creation of new kinds of voices for communities and the organisations of civil society in the face of globalisation. For this to be a sustainable project it must be located within the discourse of the public good of higher education. And meeting these challenges should not be treated as separate processes; they must be interwoven.

While this analysis has focused primarily on South Africa, the perspectives presented here have global relevance. The alienation of individuals in communities must rise, even in the richest countries and in the most democratic, as they sense that the world of their influence shrinks in the rush of globalisation. It appears therefore that the role of higher education in society must be treated both locally and globally. The notion of the re-insertion of the public good of higher education into the debate and the idea of individual and institutional alienation in the vastness

of the reach of globalisation have been used simply as a means to inject a systems approach into this discussion. The fundamental idea, surely, is that this is about transforming systems of higher education to give new and radical meanings to the practice of higher education and that community-based learning is an important lever to achieve this.

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Notes

- ¹ For a summary of this for South Africa, see for example, Lazarus (2001).
- ² For South African experiences, see Perold (1998). For African experiences, see the 1996 *Proceedings of the Meeting of the International Association of University Presidents, African and Middle East Council*. For more international experiences see Lazarus (2000).
- ³ For details, see the project's website at <http://www.chesp.org.za>.