

# Beyond the ivory tower: service learning for sustainable community development

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## ABSTRACT

Teaching, research and community service have since earliest times been regarded as the three core functions of a university. The concept and practice of service learning has succeeded in uniting these core functions. Whereas the quality of student learning resulting from service learning experiences is of crucial importance for universities, the role of service learning in community development also deserves attention.

This article explores the necessary conditions for service learning to make a viable and effective contribution to sustainable community development by critically analysing a number of service-learning projects at the University of the Free State. From this analysis certain conclusions are drawn on necessary prerequisites for service learning to satisfy the requirements of participatory development and thus contribute to sustainable community development. It is the author's contention that the university's involvement in service learning along the lines of participatory development is a crucial investment in the future of students, communities and the university itself.

## INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

The three-fold function of the Western university is well accepted and well established. Altbach (2001) explains that, since their medieval beginnings, universities have been teaching institutions, while they have also been imbued with a sense of responsibility for the public good – be it preserving books in libraries, sponsoring art museums, or service to local communities. In addition, they have seen themselves as independent places of teaching and

analysis, primarily through their research function. Teaching, research and service have therefore since earliest times been regarded as the three core functions of the university.

## THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF SERVICE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Whereas stronger emphasis on one or more of these functions has characterised the development of the university at different times (viz the emphasis on the research function of the Von Humboldt universities), individual institutions have seldom succeeded in maintaining an acceptable balance between the three functions, with either research or teaching usually superseding the service function.

Of late the concept and practice of service learning, as it is developed in a number of countries across the globe, has succeeded in uniting the three core functions of the university. Tjeldvoll (1999) cites Lynton (1995) who postulates that the traditional division of institutional mission and academic activity into the triad of teaching, research and service is obsolete and of limited utility. It is much more useful to think of academic activity "as a continuum along which basic and applied research overlap and merge into application and related forms of outreach" (Tjeldvoll 1999:6).

Swick (2001:1) describes service learning as a pedagogical strategy that combines authentic community service with integrated academic learning and goes on to say that service-learning "offers students opportunities to gain new skills, apply knowledge in challenging situations, and contribute to the life of others in meaningful ways". Elwell's (2001) description of service-learning as a pedagogy which involves academic study linked to community service through assignments that require some sort of structured reflection so that each reinforces the other, adds the

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research (reflection) dimension. For the purpose of this article service learning can be described as a programme-based, credit bearing learning experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs. Their structured reflection on the service activity leads to further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

In the South African context the concept and practice of service learning (or community service, outreach activities, engaged learning, etc) should be seen against the background of the White Paper on Higher Education Transformation (RSA DoE 1997) and the Higher Education Act (RSA 1997) which envisage the establishment of a single coordinated higher education system that not only promotes scholarship and research, but also responds to the development needs of the South African society. In this regard Waghid (1999:113) proposes that research and teaching should be expanded and applied from the universities into the community: "... community service means that universities should not be disengaged from the real problems in society, but rather, should open up possibilities, through research and teaching, for greater social relevance".

Reardon (1998, cited by Elwell 2001:47) points out that in the United States higher education has been criticised for failing to address meaningful environmental, economic and social problems, as well as failing to prepare college graduates to meet the rigours of socially responsible citizenship. Jacoby (1996, cited by Elwell 2001:47) furthermore argues that there is a growing expectation for higher education not only to focus on student learning and development, but also to deepen the commitment of addressing human needs by resolving social problems.

Whereas the quality and effectiveness of educational experiences resulting in student learning is the primary concern of every university (whether that learning occurs in a lecture hall, laboratory or a community setting), service learning should be reciprocally beneficial for both students and community. In the United States it is believed that student community service and service learning are powerful learning experiences that effect change and address America's social problems (Berson 1994, cited by Elwell 2001). "As a result of community service learning, today's college students are different from their predecessors, and as America's social problems continue to increase, more students are seeking solutions to these problems through faculty-facilitated community service-learning projects" (Elwell 2001:47).

In Australia there is an understanding that local, regional action is critical to build sustainable eco-

nomie and social development in the global economy (Mulroney 2001). A key approach to effect this is the development of partnerships between universities and communities on a local or regional basis. "This approach requires a willingness to begin from local communities, to spend time in and with the community, analysing the community's needs for the present and its aspirations for the future" (Mulroney 2001:4).

In a developing country such as South Africa with huge development needs, it makes sense to put particular emphasis on meeting identified community needs as a primary component of service learning. When discussing the role of service learning in community development, however, it seems necessary to consider the sustainability of such involvement and the effects thereof.

For years it has been an axiom of development studies that spending money on primary education is the best investment a society can make. But there is a growing sense that in a world being shaped by the information and biotechnology revolutions, basic education is not enough. Elliott (2001) posits that poor countries cannot capture the gains of new technologies without expanding the numbers of those who have high-level skills. It is therefore not only necessary to help poor countries strike a balance between primary and higher education, but it is imperative to investigate how the poor can benefit from new technologies. "The Internet is not a magic bullet that will solve rural poverty; genetically modified crops will not, overnight, bring food to those who now go hungry. Yet the transformative power of the information and biotechnology revolutions is vast ..." (Elliott 2001:34). Investigating the role of higher education in sustainable community development necessitates a closer look at the conditions for sustainable development.

#### **PARTICIPATORY AND PEOPLE-CENTRED DEVELOPMENT AS NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Behera and Erasmus (1999) point out that until the 1980s, "development" was viewed either as a linear process of cause and effect, or it was explained by the "logic of capital" in terms of the radical critique associated with neo-Marxism. Either a top-down approach was followed, trying to locate what went "wrong", why, and how it could be fixed, or capitalism was viewed as an obstacle to development and the cause of poverty.

However, over the past 20 years a paradigm shift regarding the way "development" is conceptualised has taken place, and, linking up with post modernism, the development discourse currently goes beyond conventional economic growth thinking. According to Behera and Erasmus (1999) the single most

important theme is the recognition of the complex relationship between planned interventions and strategic outcomes and they conclude that "(i)t is not possible to link specific achievements with specific outcomes" (Behera & Erasmus 1999:1).

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defines sustainable development as development which meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs (Behera & Erasmus 1999:3). Various definitions of sustainable development include the following components:

- The achievement of lasting satisfaction of human needs.
- The improvement of the quality of human life.
- The idea of self-reliant development.
- The idea of cost-effective development.
- The notion that people-centred initiatives are needed — in other words, human beings are the resources in the concept (Behera & Erasmus 1999:3-4).

Taking the above into account, sustainable development encompasses not only economic and social activities, but also addresses issues related to populations and their use of natural resources, as well as their impact on the environment. In other words, it takes account of the transformation of the environment in the course of development. Furthermore, sustainable development requires a commitment to overcoming poverty through a focus on the welfare issues of the poorest sectors of society. In order to attain this, it adopts a systems approach ensuring that the economic, political and social relationships between elements in the system (people and places) stimulate and facilitate economic growth while also conserving the environment. As a result it forms a pattern of social and structural economic transformations that optimises the economic and other available societal benefits, both at present and in the future (Behera & Erasmus 1999:4).

Of particular importance for service-learning activities is the prerequisite that indigenous knowledge should be utilised for or linked to planned development strategies. "Many indigenous groups possess namely a source of information on the environment that enables them to manage their environments in ways that are sustainable in the long term. However, the experience of these people is rarely incorporated in formal structures for development and/or environmental planning" (Behera & Erasmus 1999:4).

One of the implications of the above is that the epistemologies of local communities need to be embraced and integrated in development projects. Norgaard (1985) warns, however, that indigenous knowledge is not easy to incorporate into "scientific" knowledge, since experiential learning requires an

evolutionary rationale which is different from that of bureaucratically managed planning institutions (including universities).

It seems then that if development is to have any meaning and if it is to make a long-term positive impact on the lives of communities, it can only be done within the framework of the people concerned. Yet development, even in developing or Third World countries, cannot be conceived of in general terms. The developing world is not a homogenous entity, and most of these countries are multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial, multi-religious and multilingual. "They comprise not a single social reality but multiple realities of various groups and communities" (Behera & Erasmus 1999:5). It is therefore of primary importance that any development effort should address itself to the specific needs of local communities and work in a local context.

Coetzee and Graaff (1996) point out that macro-structural theories have shown themselves to be out of touch with the reality of individuals' lives, because of overemphasising the importance of broad societal structures and neglecting the contribution of individual capacity, creativity and insight. The result was that, in practice, the policies flowing from these theoretical underpinnings proved themselves unsustainable. "Driven by macro agencies like governments and the World Bank, development initiatives had too frequently failed to engage people on the ground. They had been marked by arrogance, by violence to the people and the environment, and ultimately by failure" (Coetzee & Graaff 1996:1).

By contrast a people-centred approach provides a micro-foundation for development studies. This approach presupposes that development does not only imply the satisfaction of basic needs, but also the right to live a meaningful life. "Given the focus on people and the way in which individuals experience social reality, the micro-sociological perspective argues that the only directly observable aspect in analysing social reality is the individual. Empirical phenomena such as the state, organisations and the economy exist in as far as they emerge as a composite series of micro experiences" (Coetzee & Graaff 1996:9). The implication is that development that is forced from the macro-dimension without being positively experienced or accepted by individuals will probably not be sustainable.

In fusing macro- and micro-perspectives, the theory of participatory development as it is reflected in the paradigm of people-centred development would seem to address the above-mentioned failures and needs. People-centred development stresses the participation of the majority of the population, especially the previously excluded components such as women, youth, the illiterate, etc. in the process of development. This paradigm strongly relates to one of

the four kinds of development distinguished by Mabogunje (1980, cited by Omotola 2000), namely development as distributive justice. "Development as distributive justice does not permit exploitation of the weak but rather encourages and enhances the accessibility of essential public goods and services to the different social classes" (Omotola 2000:118).

Roodt (1996:317) cites the following reasons for this shift to people-centred development: "In a general sense, it is part of a world-wide movement away from centralised state control, to regional and local democratisation and the development of a civil society, which was emphasised by the fall of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Closer to home, the failure of the African state, in many although not all instances, to bring about sustainable development, especially in rural areas, has led to further disillusionment with bureaucratic governmental institutions".

Korten (1990, cited by Roodt 1996) has the following vision for people-centred development, namely that it is:

- voluntary citizen action embodied in people's organisations;
- a global consciousness which will oppose the growth-centred approach with its vested interests;
- an environmentally sound, sustainable people-driven approach which emphasises the interests of local communities as opposed to national and international business.

This vision is encapsulated by the following extract from the Manila Declaration on People's Participation and Sustainable Development: "To exercise their sovereignty and assume responsibility for the development of themselves and their communities, the people must control their own resources, have access to relevant information, and have the means to hold the officials of government accountable" (Korten 1990, cited by Roodt 1996:318).

### THESE (AND OTHER) IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE LEARNING

What are the implications of the above for the theoretical framework, the practice of and research on service learning in higher education? Experiences in the United States (Checkoway 1996) have shown that many academics are trained in positivist research methods that discourage community participation in defining problems, gathering data and using results. In an unpublished paper, Fear, Bawden, Rosaen and Foster-Fishmann (2002) ground their approach to engaged learning (service learning) philosophically in a participatory worldview and they go on to differentiate the participatory worldview from the positivist worldview that they regard as a dominant worldview in science and in society. "A participatory worldview ... lodges responsibility for learning in the hands of

those who are most affected – people in context. A participatory worldview repositions knowledge FROM a commodity produced by experts TO knowledge that people co-create and use (often with experts) in their settings" (Fear *et al.* 2002:9). A participatory worldview is inherently experiential, cooperative, interactive, and iterative, where those involved are "co-present" in the evolution of meaning and understanding. The authors (Fear *et al.* 2002:10) believe that a participatory worldview endorses what is known as "a sustainability ethos".

In reflecting on regional material-flow studies, Anderberg (1999) makes a number of salient points with regard to sustainable development. While the goal of sustainable development – which links environmental change to economic development – has become widely established, there is also an admission that, for this, new types of knowledge and understanding are needed (Anderberg 1999:139). One effect of this, cited by Anderberg (1999:139) is, for example, decreasing financial support for conventional environmental research and the setting up of new cross-disciplinary research programmes directed towards strategies for sustainable development. As yet, such research is fairly undeveloped. This is confirmed in the South African context by remarks made at the recent colloquium on "Building relationships between higher education and the private and public sectors", where business leaders referred to the lack of scientific research and understanding of societal problems in South African communities and the development of such communities. What is needed, is what Anderberg (1999:142) calls "an improved understanding of society, its change and relation to nature" and the "complex linkages between society and nature in a changing world". He further argues that, when evaluating social change and constructing scenarios that can serve as frameworks for analysing and discussing strategies for social development, it is insufficient to focus only on a few elements in society (Anderberg 1999:144).

Much of the above has also been posited in the well-known Mode 1 - Mode 2 knowledge production thesis of Michael Gibbons. Gibbons (1998) suggests that a certain impatience towards disciplinary science is emerging in the developing world and an understanding of complex problems is particularly relevant in the developing country context. "As soon as one begins to focus on understanding complex systems, the need for different types of expertise becomes obvious – and the need for partnerships and alliances becomes imperative" (Gibbons 1998:54).

The unique role of universities as generators, transmitters and appliers of knowledge has assumed even greater importance in this era of globalisation and the knowledge society. Braskamp and Wergin (1997, cited by Subotzky 1999:423) believe that "higher education today has an opportunity unique in its

history to contribute to our society". To play this role effectively, they should become active partners in addressing community development, among others, by means of service learning.

### SERVICE LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

The eight service-learning modules at the University of the Free State (UFS) that were evaluated against the background of the above discussion of the prerequisites for sustainable development, are an outcome of a process of community-involvement that the UFS has been engaged in since the early 1990s. In 1991 staff members from the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Social Sciences met with representatives of the Kellogg Foundation (US) to discuss the possibilities of establishing a project involving the university with regard to rendering a primary health care service to the local community of Mangaung. In September of the same year a workshop held with participants from 42 organisations in the Mangaung community, representatives from the UFS and from government departments (service providers) identified health care and related needs as a priority as far as the development of the community is concerned.

The absence of any infrastructure for offering primary health care programmes in the community made the erection of a multipurpose community health care centre at a strategically placed site in Mangaung imperative. As the Mangaung University Community Partnership Programme (MUCPP) evolved and developed, needs other than primary health care were articulated by the community. These included basic needs such as housing, roads, water, sewerage disposal, electricity, as well as social needs such as recreational facilities, social services for women, children and the aged, addressing *inter alia* teenage pregnancies and substance abuse, the lack of early learning opportunities, school readiness and adult illiteracy.

Programme development by the MUCPP was process-oriented and included wide-ranging consultation with and involvement of particularly three partners, namely academic staff of the UFS, members of the Mangaung community and provincial health authorities. The five phases envisaged for the programme were:

- Phase 1: Exploring possibilities
- Phase 2: Building a partnership
- Phase 3: Ensuring ownership and governance of the programme by the partners
- Phase 4: Building of infrastructure
- Phase 5: Operationalisation, including development of portfolios for the implementation of projects. Portfolios of eight staff members for the MUCPP appointed over a period of three years

included community development, health services, education and training, youth development and administration. The aim of these projects is to empower community members with the necessary knowledge and skills in order to create employment and to find solutions for community problems themselves.

Over the years various Faculties and academic departments at the UFS participated to a larger or lesser extent in the community development projects at the MUCPP. The Faculty of Health Sciences, in particular the School of Medical Sciences and the School of Nursing, has played an important role. Their adoption of a problem-based approach to teaching and learning in 1995 contributed greatly in this regard. Other departments that initiated or participated in projects include Psychology, Entomology, Agricultural Management, and Leisure Sciences. This involvement led to eight modules offered by various departments being included in the first year of the CHESP (Community Higher Education Service Partnership Programme) Project initiated and funded by the Joint Education Trust (JET). "The aim of CHESP is to contribute to the reconstruction and development of South African civil society through the development and promotion of socially responsive 'models' for higher education. Central to these 'models' is the development of partnerships between communities, higher education institutions, and the public, private, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors. The purpose of these partnerships are: community empowerment and development; transformation of the higher education system in relation to community needs; and enhancing service delivery to previously underserved communities" (Lazarus 2001:1). The UFS was one of five South African universities involved in the first year of the implementation of the CHESP initiative during 2001.

From the above discussion, a number of critical conditions for service-learning to contribute to sustainable community development were identified and taken as a point of departure to evaluate eight service-learning projects at the University of the Free State. These were:

- A strong focus on community needs.
- Involvement of community in cybernetic cycle of needs identification, planning, implementation and evaluation of projects.
- Establishing and maintaining effective partnerships.
- Acceptance of the complexities related to community development.
- Involvement of disadvantaged groups, eg women, youth, elderly.
- Integrated and iterative processes of learning by and from the community.

## CRITICAL EVALUATION OF CHESP MODULES AGAINST THE CRITERIA FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The eight CHESP modules implemented during 2001 at the UFS included Event and Facility Management, Pest and Pesticide Management, Strategic Management in Agriculture, Counselling and Community Psychology, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Community Paediatrics, and two Community-based Nursing modules. These modules were implemented as partnership projects between the academic departments at the UFS, the local community and relevant service providers (such as the Department of Health, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Education). All of these modules include a service-learning component as part of the curriculum and students are involved in various ways in community service. Year levels of students vary from first-year to postgraduate (Master's students), and the time spent by students in the community, the activities they are involved in, and so on, vary greatly from module to module. A primary premise for all of the projects, however, is that they should focus on the establishment and building of strong partnerships for community development.

The evaluation was done mainly by critically analysing the reflective annual self-evaluation reports written by project coordinators. From a critical analysis of the narrative reports the following benefits to the community could be identified:

- **Social benefits:** The Event and Facility Management project, as an example, makes an important social contribution by providing recreational opportunities for children in the community, thereby keeping them off the streets and out of potential trouble. In addition, life skills such as negotiation and conflict resolution skills are acquired by participating young people. Social benefits are also evident in the Community Psychology and Counselling project which is aimed at supporting capacity-building in the community, empowering school learners and providing them with knowledge and opportunities to improve their quality of life. Learners not only benefit individually by means of acquiring skills to enhance their learning, improve career planning and resolve personal problems, but schools also report improved social and interpersonal relationships. Another example is the Community Nursing project that identified the need for support to raped and sexually abused children and their parents.
- **Educational benefits:** Benefits related to education in the community primarily result from the Community Psychology and Counselling project where learning development and achievement have in all likelihood contributed to the improved matriculation results of the Mangaung community.
- **Knowledge and information:** Virtually all the narrative reports mention a growth in knowledge

and provision of information to the community as one of the benefits of their respective projects. Community members are better informed with regard to, *inter alia*, health issues (including HIV/Aids) and health services, pests and the use of pesticides in vegetable production, product mix and strategic marketing in vegetable production, life skills, effective resource utilisation, etc.

- **Skills acquisition:** According to the narrative reports, community members acquired or developed a wide range of skills such as first aid, the use of condoms, treatment of minor ailments, vegetable production, etc.
- **Behavioural changes:** Whereas some of the gains in knowledge and information may be regarded as short-term benefits, project coordinators believe that many of these could lead to intermediate and long-term outcomes related to changes in the behaviour of community members. Some that are mentioned include better utilisation of resources, assuming responsibility for own and others' health, continuous health behaviour improvement, improved attendance of antenatal services and immunisation clinics and more responsible sexual behaviour.
- **Capacity-building:** The building of capacity in the community in various areas can be regarded as another intermediate to long-term benefit. This should contribute to the community becoming increasingly empowered and more self-reliant in various life spheres such as mental and physical health, sexual behaviour, family planning, food production and leisure management. Community members were also empowered to take responsibility for the teaching of others in the community (as in the Community Nursing project). This enhances the sustainability of capacity-building initiatives in the broader community.

Project coordinators seemed to focus strongly on long-term holistic benefits to the community such as becoming a healthy, self-reliant community that is capable of utilising resources effectively, improving health indicators, changing sexual risk behaviour and becoming lifelong partners in health care systems.

The analysis of the service-learning projects revealed a relatively lesser focus on community needs with stronger emphasis on the needs of students. This was particularly noticeable in the medical science and nursing projects. A further point of criticism is that only one project employed a structured process of a cybernetic cycle including needs analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation on a continuous basis. The Community Psychology project which has been running for ten years, has apparently succeeded in continuously adapting to real community needs and focusing on addressing those.

Partnership development features strongly in all the project reports. There is very little evidence, however,

of how effective the partnerships between the university, the community and service providers are, with the possible exception of the Community Psychology project.

The realisation that community development, even in a relatively delineated initiative such as vegetable production, is a complex issue requiring a multi-pronged approach, is effecting some changes in the projects on Pest and Pesticide Management and Strategic Management in Agriculture, both of which contribute to vegetable production in a peri-urban area. The involvement of other academic departments will enhance the community's capacity on other areas of the vegetable production chain, such as preservation and marketing.

Many of the current projects target disadvantaged groups in the community such as women (Obstetrics, Community-based Nursing), children (Paediatrics), the elderly (Community-based Nursing), and youth (Community Psychology). In some instances the empowerment of the target groups is already evident from the reports.

The major shortcoming of the eight CHESP projects described above is possibly the lack of an integrative and iterative approach to learning by and from the community. In most instances reports mention students' greater understanding of the problems and needs of communities because of their service-learning involvement, but what is lacking, is a regard for the community as a source of learning in order to contribute to their own development. There is a lack of interrogation and utilisation of local epistemologies and cosmologies in order to move to a true process of sustainable community development.

## CONCLUSION

Omotola (2000) posits that no-one doubts the role of universities the world over as actors in sustained national development. This article has tried to illustrate that service learning can play a significant role in this regard. However, for community development initiatives through service-learning to become and remain sustainable, certain criteria as illustrated above need to be met. These should be taken into account in the planning and establishing of service-learning projects at South African universities.

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