Questioning service learning in South Africa: Problematising partnerships in the South African context. A case study from the University of KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

Service learning is increasing in popularity in South Africa and has been conceptualised as occurring in the context of partnerships between higher education institutions and their local communities. However the relevance of the partnership model as a framework for service learning and sustainable community development within the South African context has not been critically examined and needs to be explored.

This article aims to provide insight into the partnership and development processes that form the context for interpreting the outcomes of service learning, through reflecting on the experiences and lessons learnt within the partnerships at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. Drawing on themes extracted from an analysis of service learning practices at the university, various issues are highlighted to extract theoretical frameworks shortcomings, potential real-world tensions, implications for service learning in higher education within South Africa and issues for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Service learning, with a purported goal of enhanced sustainable community development, has been identified as an important role of higher education institutions. A key approach to achieving the aims of service learning is the formation and development of partnerships between universities, communities and other service providers (Fourie 2003). Ideally service learning is designed to benefit both the ‘provider’ and the ‘recipient’ of the service equally, with the use of partnerships as a means to extend limited resources in such a way as to affirm each respective partner’s strengths and contributions (Castle and Osman 2003; Fess, Bonsuuto, Johnson and Moreland 2003).

The Community Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP) Project in South Africa has been explored as a model for development at six universities in the country, with the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg (UKZN) being one of the pilot sites. The CHESP Project at UKZN ran from 1999–2002.
Two years were spent planning an intervention (including audits, policy development, strategic planning) and the subsequent two years focused on implementation. The partnership consisted of a collaboration between UKZN, the Inzali community (a rural ‘black’ community) and local government. A decision was taken in early 2003 to discontinue the project.

The ultimate aim of the national CHESP project is: ‘the reconstruction and development of South African civil society through the development of socially accountable models for higher education, research, community service and development’ (Joint Education Trust (JET) 1999, 2). Additionally the CHESP project documentation states that ‘central to these models is the development of partnerships between developing communities, higher education institutions and the service sector’ (JET 1999, 2). The CHESP Project is therefore built around a model of partnership between three sectors: higher education, the community, and the service sector (namely government, not-for-profit, and public service organisations). As conceptualised by the CHESP these partnerships operate on three different yet interacting levels:

1. the macro level – the level of the national project (all six universities) and the national Department of Education and its policies;
2. the meso level – the level of the campus;
3. the micro level – the level of the individual academic module and its community-and-service partners.

At UKZN implementation occurred on the micro-level, with certain ‘pilot modules’ being selected for participation in the programme. Although the CHESP was aimed at promoting community development, funding for project activities was channelled through the university and allocated for academic modules (‘pilot modules’) and not towards specific community development priorities. As will become evident, a major mismatch occurred between the capacity of the university (the modules on offer) and the priorities of the community.

The move from a general focus on partnerships at UKZN to a focus on service learning and service learning partnerships (CHESP) was not without criticism and caution. David Maughan Brown (Deputy Vice-Chancellor of University of Kwazulu-Natal 2001) issued the following cautionary, seemingly prophetic, statement at the International Partnership Conference held in South Africa in 1998: ‘On the one hand I fully endorse the idea of service learning. On the other hand, it would seem to me to be a betrayal of the mutuality of the partnership relationship to assume a dominant role in the partnership and promote as the educational intervention to be espoused by the partnership a programme which is manifestly to the advantage of the university and defies the university squarely back in the centre of a wheel of relationships which may turn out to be little better than the extension relationships of the past.’ (Maughan Brown 1998, cited in Donovan and Wolfe 1998, 73).

THE SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

It is important to bear in mind the specific set of contextual and developmental factors that set South Africa apart from other countries, especially from many of those countries that produce much of the service learning literature that is used as a guide for South African service learning programmes. Due to the legacy of apartheid great inequalities exist within South Africa, and one can move from a first world environment to a third world environment within a journey of less than half an hour. The trends of increased unemployment and poverty levels, the resultant increase in crime and violence, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its devastation of families and communities means that the majority of the population are struggling with subsistence needs.

The Inzali community and specifically the Emzamweni school which were chosen as the meso-level partners in this CHESP project have, like so many areas within South Africa, a history of destruction due to political violence. Any community development initiative in the South African context faces vast levels of ‘neediness’ within communities, as well as a socio-political context that has implications in terms of the level of organisation and development present in communities.

THE DEVELOPMENT LIFE CYCLE: UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT IN RELATION TO THE CHESP PROJECT

When attempting to understand whether higher education can play a role in community development it is essential to investigate the conditions necessary for sustainable community development. The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) (CDRA 1998/1999) provides a framework for understanding the development process in a variety of contexts. The notion of development as presented by the CDRA has been a major influence in analysing the development practices within the UKZN CHESP project.

Firstly, the CDRA emphasises that development is ‘a natural organic process that is already happening before, during and after our arrival or intervention’ (CDRA, 1998/1999). The CHESP was originally framed as a development project at UKZN, designed in conjunction with the Inzali community, with great emphasis placed on avoiding the notion of the university ‘bringing development’.

Secondly, the notion that ‘development is non-linear and very difficult to predict. Full of unintended and unplanned consequences, positive and negative’ (CDRA 1998/1999). The CHESP approach, by design, attempted to allow varying levels of flexibility and processes at the institutional level (meso-level) to respond to these unplanned changes, however, the degree of flexibility was constrained by the national programme (macro-level) which had prescribed guidelines and objectives.

Thirdly, ‘development processes are characterised by phases of growth, cul-
mining in developmental crises' (CDRA 1998/1999). Due to the nature of developmental processes, developmental crises are often not immediately obvious to the outside observer. A lack of in-depth relationships with the community resulted in a lack of insight regarding their developmental crises. It was hoped that as relationships built-up over time an improved 'reading' and understanding of development in the Inadi community would become possible – this was not achieved.

Fourthly, the CDRA proposes that development is the 'facilitation of the growing capacity of people' (CDRA 1998/1999). This is consistent with the CHESP approach where the emphasis was on the development of leadership, interactive learning and civil responsibility in all of the three sectors involved in the CHESP project. This aim was hoped to be achieved by the intersecting nature of the interaction of the three sectors involved namely the UKZNPs, the community and government service providers.

Given the intricate and complex nature of community development, and the important role of relationships and partnerships in development described above, it is vital to problematise the notion of service learning partnerships.

PARTNERSHIPS

Often the term partnership is mentioned in relation to service learning, however, the exact meaning and implications of the term are rarely explored. Nyden and Wiewel (cited in Harkavy and Wiewel 1995) argue that the academy has, as yet, not devoted enough thought to the study of partnerships. Holland and Gelmon (1998, 5) describe effective partnerships as 'knowledge-based collaborations in which all partners have a right to each other, things to learn from each other, and things they will learn together'. In an attempt to further expand understanding of partnerships the following definition was developed by Teresa Hogue, of the Oregon Center for Community Leadership, and provides an excellent summary of the basic significance of the term. Hogue (1994) describes the relationship of a 'partnership' along three dimensions.

1. The dimension of purpose, with the purpose of a partnership being to share resources in addressing common issues and to merge resource bases to create something new.
2. The dimension of structure, with the structure of a partnership being a central body of people which consists of decision makers who have defined roles and formalised links, and who develop new resources and a joint budget.
3. The dimension of process, with the process of a partnership involving autonomous leadership with a focus on issues, group decision-making in all group; and clear, frequent communication.

Hogue's (1994) definition is relevant as it may be that universities are using the language of partnerships when in fact they are aiming for a different level of community linkage where less sharing and joint ownership are required, for example a co-operation or an alliance.

However, when considering partnerships Holland and Gelmon (1998, 3-5) caution that 'communities . . . resent being treated as an experimental laboratory for higher education and resist the unidirectional nature of campus efforts' and further warn that many institutions use partnerships to serve their own interests and treat their partners as 'study subjects'. This warning underscores Maughan Brown's concerns about service learning at UKZNPs described above.

Necessary conditions for successful partnerships

The Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) (CCPH 2000) produced a guide which encompasses principles for partnership development specifically within the service learning context, which is used and expanded upon here to summarise the basic principles of partnership.

- Partners have agreed-upon missions, values, goals and measurable outcomes for the partnership, namely a common purpose for the partnership (CCPH 2000). With the exception, the projects and programmes that failed to accomplish their goals or faced serious crises were the ones in which partners failed to make their goals and procedures explicit so that they could be negotiated at the outset' (Wiewel and Lieber 1998, 297).
- The relationship between partners is characterised by mutual trust, respect, genuineness and commitment (CCPH 2000). 'Trust, in this scenario, arises from consistently meeting expectations and creating outcomes which the partners perceive as mutually beneficial, so that they decide to keep working together' (Wiewel and Lieber 1998, 294).
- The partnership builds upon identified strengths and assets, but also addresses areas that need improvement (CCPH 2000). The resources of each partner need to be recognised and developed as the effective use and enhancement of community capacity are based on clear identification of community resources and strengths (Ansari and Phillips 2001a; Holland and Gelmon 1998).
- The partnership balances power among partners and enables resources among partners to be shared (CCPH 2000). Ansari and Phillips (2001a) warn that the resolution of major power disparities is a vital point in partnership work as differences in the distribution of power within a partnership could have detrimental effects to the future and sustainability of collaborative efforts.
- There is clear, open and accessible communication between partners, making it an ongoing priority to listen to each need, develop a common language and validate or clarify the meaning of terms (CCPH 2000).
- Roles, norms and processes for the partnership are established with the input and agreement of all partners (CCPH 2000).
- There is feedback from, among and from all the stakeholders in the partnership with the goal of continuously improving the partnership and its outcomes.
partnership has clear consequences for the community and the institution, there should be an ongoing commitment to evaluation that involves all partners (Hollan and Gelmon 1998).

- Partners share the credit for the partnership’s accomplishments (CCPH 2000).
- Partnerships take time to develop, and evolve over time (CCPH 2000). Time needs to be allowed for the development of trusting relationships which develop each partner’s capacity and perspective (Lucas and Mayfield 1998).

**Partnerships as Community Development Projects and Lessons Learnt from the UKZN Community Development Project Experience**

Project management literature provides a useful perspective for understanding partnerships as a specific kind of project, namely as a community development project. The perspective of community development projects differs from other projects in terms of their desired outputs (namely development change) and the methods employed to establish the project. Atkins and Milhe (1997, cited in Nel 1997) explain that development projects move beyond “conventional” projects by encouraging and assisting the beneficiary community to participate actively in the project and to take ownership as far as possible of the assets created, maximising the long-term project benefits to alleviate poverty in a sustainable and replicable manner. Community development projects can be used as vehicles for training and building the capacity of the local community, enhancing employment opportunities through the use of labour intensive technologies and minimising negative environmental impact, thereby enhancing sustainability (Brown 1997, cited in Cloete and Wissink 2000).

The development project life cycle (Brown 1997, cited in Cloete and Wissink 2000) outlines various phases of evolution within community development projects where challenges may arise. Various difficulties experienced by the UKZN at the various stages of the development project life cycle were explicated by analyses of in-depth interviews with pilot module co-ordinators and community evaluation information.

Regarding the process of contextualization, the notion of a continual process of gaining understanding is central. Thus, as work within the partnership continues and as alternative frameworks emerge understanding of each partner’s contexts is enhanced. The model prescribed by CHESP necessitated focusing on a particular geographic community. This form of contextualization caused some difficulties in terms of the distance of this community from campus, its previous exclusion from the municipal boundaries (it is now included) and most importantly, in terms of a limited and superficial understanding of the workings of the community itself, thus resulting in unmet expectations and disappointments.

In retrospect, Polvika’s pre-partnership conditions (namely environmental factors, situational factors and task characteristics) (1995, cited in Foss et al. 2003) would have been useful during the contextualisation stage. Had these factors been considered, the university’s and the community’s actual capacity to partner may have been explored. Over time it has become apparent that both the university and the community appear to lack basic social, economic and awareness factors required for effective partnering.

Regarding conceptualisation, implied in the CHESP documentation is the notion of ‘community’ as meaning ‘previously disadvantaged’. This way of framing ‘community’ is not always useful, and limits opportunities to explore other forms of communities as potential partners. The notion of partnership was also not clearly defined at the outset – a model of partnership development and an understanding of partnership processes would have been useful in making sense of the UKZN partnership experience. The UKZN understanding of the partnership concept has developed over time and with this evolution a questioning of the relationship with the community and service sectors in terms of the nature of a partnership (and all that that meaning implies) has developed.

In regards to the planning and development phase, the planning of the details of the project included planning of the allocation of resources. The initial grant made by JET was to the university partner and as such responsibility, accountability and reporting for finances remained with the university partner. This allocation of resources, both in the planning and implementation phases, inevitably led to a power imbalance. The focus on the pilot modules as funding units created a mismatch between the developmental priorities of the Insi leadership and the focus of the academic disciplines. This was further complicated by attempting to incorporate the service sector that was more inclined to work with community development issues than academic disciplines.

With respect to project implementation rules and responsibilities became clearer, as did the difficulties entailed in running the programme. Implementation challenges were to facilitate the integration of activities in order to achieve synergy and to ensure that the discipline-based work addressed community development priorities. A lack of use of the local epistemologies and existing developmental processes may have been the cause of these challenges, with the higher education sector failing to fully recognise and utilise the local knowledge available to the project.

In terms of concluding the partnership, there was no agreement from the partners in this regard. The theory recommends planning an exit strategy and ensuring that the necessary mechanisms are in place to encourage sustainability. This did not occur in the UKZN case. With the cessation of ‘soft’ funding the initial CHESP partnership has dissolved. The community is reportedly disappointed with a lack of tangible outcomes (Mathieson 2002), the service partner has focused on other priorities, and the university continues to practice service learning with those sites that existed prior to the ‘arranged marriage’ of the CHESP project. One of the authors attempted to continue working in Insi beyond
the initial implementation period, however, the community partner requested that
students not be sent to the site due to a lack of capacity to handle the extra
demands of hosting students at the school. The school felt that they were under-
resourced and over-stretched and as such had no capacity to absorb the university’s
interventions (Mathieson 2002).

The processes of empowerment and capacity building need to underlie the
previous stages; however, as can be seen from the above ensuring sustainability at
Emzamweni school was problematic. Paradoxically, the capacity to ‘say no’ to the
university may also be an indication of empowerment. Although attempts were
made to build capacity at the site, those that were involved in the project
(community co-ordinators) managed to secure employment (possibly through their
improved capacity) and left the area to work elsewhere. This is possibly a positive
by-product of the process, given the current economic climate, but leaves the issue
of sustainability unresolved.

The overall process of development necessarily means a tolerance of
uncertainty, and the recognition of the developmental processes involved. Within
the CHESS partnership it was difficult to balance the need for outcomes (both from
a learning and a Funder perspective) with the developmental process as the
requirements of the Funder impact on the flexibility allowed for this process.

Fourie’s (2003) description of the areas of partnership and sustainable
community development in the service learning projects described at the
University of the Free State (UFS) highlights the fact that the difficulties
experienced by the UKZN project were not isolated cases, but are
experienced in service learning projects in other areas of South Africa. Fourie
(2003, 36) asserted that the CHESS projects at the UFS were based on ‘a primary
premise . . . that they should focus on the establishment and building of strong
partnerships for community development’ and that ‘partnership development
features strongly in all the project reports’. However, Fourie recognised that a
focus on student needs took wide precedence over community needs, and that
nearly all projects described were not continually evaluated in terms of changing
community needs and desires. Fourie also stated that the effectiveness of the
community-university ‘partnerships’ described in the project reports were never
established. Fourie (2003, 37) correctly attributed some of these shortcomings, as
in the case of the UKZN, to a lack of learning from the community by the other
‘partners’ involved as Fourie described a major shortcoming as ‘possibly the lack
of an integrative and iterative approach to learning by and from the community’.

Fourie’s (2003) account of the service learning projects at the UFS serves to
emphasise the lack of critical reflection within the service learning fraternity over
the true meaning of the term partnership and the universities’ ability to achieve
sustainable community development.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE LESSONS LEARNED AT UKZN FOR SERVICE
LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The preceding sections on development and partnerships, and the shortcomings of
the UKZN project, beg the following question: Are universities capable of
entering into true partnerships? Do communities have the capacity to partner with
universities? If the focus of the partnership is a particular geographic community,
how does this impact on the role of the service provider? Will partnerships lead to
sustainable community development?

Morton (1997) challenges universities to move from relating to communities in
the form of ‘charity’ to focusing on issues of justice. The problem with charity,
writes Morton (1997, 8), is ‘that it too readily becomes an excuse for maintaining
laws and social arrangements which ought themselves to be changed in the
interests of fair play’. Gillespie (2000, 24) explains on this caution, ‘even where
programmes consciously attempt to avoid a charitable approach to partnership,
communities may still feel used by the university as merely means to ends
that primarily benefit the university’. Gillespie explains that in these cases partnerships
result in an overemphasis on the server and an under-emphasis on the causes of the
problem, thereby perpetuating oppression and marginalisation of communities. In
such cases one would necessarily question whether these really are true
community-university partnerships in terms of the guidelines and principles
discussed above.

From the description of the development process it is apparent that
development is an intricate and complex process requiring large amounts of time
and energy. If this development is to be achieved through partnerships with
universities, there needs to be a commitment to the development process in terms
of the core functioning of the university and resource allocation. While most South
African universities emphasise development in their mission statement (UKZN is
no exception), in reality teaching and research are considered priorities. In the
interview process at the UKZN all module co-ordinators felt that for a variety of
reasons (ideological, pedagogical, knowledge production) the university should be
engaged with its community. They also reported, however, that this was difficult in
the current university climate due to downsizing, and pressure to fulfil other
responsibilities especially research and publication, and teaching.

In South Africa where needs are more around tangible, infrastructural issues, do
universities have a role to play, when all they can offer are students with limited
knowledge and skills? The CHESS model emphasised a focus on a particular
geographic community, often this community is underdeveloped in terms of basic
infrastructure (for example a lack of toilets) and despite negotiations, continues to
look to the university for relief of basic needs. When asked about their experiences
of working in the Inadzi community, module co-ordinators reported that they had
difficulty marrying academic skills with needs of the community. In addition other
difficulties experienced were common to those experienced by other service
learning projects such as difficulties with community expectations, sustainability of initiatives in the community, logistics (such as communication, transport and organisation), integration of activities and efforts, changing community representatives and a lack of clarity regarding service provider role and scope (Fourie 2003).

The notion of common purpose, which as described in the partnerships section is central to partnerships, remained elusive in the UKZN context. When each partner is entering the process with possibly unexpressed expectations is common purpose possible? It appears that real communication around partner’s hopes and dreams only emerges as the partnership attains a ‘shared reality’ where partners are able to negotiate each other’s realities and arrive at common understandings. In addition to common purpose, partnerships need to recognize levels of mutuality and separateness. Mutuality in terms of recognition, access to resources and access to opportunities, and separateness in terms of each partner’s sense of autonomy, the recognition of boundaries, their spheres of competence and the freedom to choose whether to participate in the partnership seems to be lacking in many higher education service learning projects.

The notion of power in partnerships is vital in terms of how it interacts with the development process. The community partner from Inadi described the UKZN CHESP partnership as a ‘big-brother, little-brother relationship’ where he reported that he experienced the university as the big brother leading the little brother. One module co-ordinator asked ‘which community would turn down an opportunity to work with the university? There is always the hope of a positive outcome as a result of the relationship.’ In the UKZN CHESP experience, the power issues were further exacerbated by locating the funding for the project within the university and not with the other partners. Secondly, as described above, funding was allocated for academic modules and not development priorities. These power issues directly impact on the experience of the micro-level partnerships, where module co-ordinators reported that it appears that the university often drives the process and there is a level of passivity from community. Module co-ordinators also discussed the notion of equality (sameness between partners) versus equity (justice between partners) with regards to money, power and decision-making. As long as the power dynamics are swayed in the direction of the university true partnerships with the community may never be possible.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE SERVICE LEARNING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

This article began with a quote from David Maughan Brown explaining his concerns for an existing partnership, regarding the impact of a shift in emphasis to focus on service learning, and how this may result in a ‘betrayal of the mutuality of the partnership relationship’ (Maughan Brown 1998, cited in Donovan and Wolfe 1998, 73). It seems these were indeed prophetic words. The UKZN CHESP experience has found that the university has dominated the partnership, possibly to the detriment of the developmental aims of the project itself.

The question of whether service learning in South Africa is appropriate or realistic when set against the vast needs of many South African communities is a valid one, though perhaps the answer lies in the fact that service learning may be essential to the future of South African higher education communities and the wider context in which the education system operates. However, there are essential changes that need to occur within the various sectors that may possibly be involved with community development projects to ensure that the ideal benefits of service learning projects are attained.

Conceivably the future of successful service learning, with the outcomes of sustained community development, may lie in recognising that the often neglected role of community outreach and development in higher education needs to come to the fore along with the more traditional roles of research and teaching. This shift in emphasis in higher education institutions could lead to the development of the institution’s partnering capacity and partnering skills. Fundamental to this would be developing the desire for reciprocal learning from the community, developing the ability to share resources and decision-making, and vitally developing real support for service learning from the leadership of the university (Ramaley 1997).

Ansari and Phillips (2001b, 247) write ‘with a high desirability for some form of collaborative activity becoming the sine qua non of effective practice, but with remarkably little knowledge about how it works, collaboration is a paradoxical concept’. If partnerships are to remain the context for service learning practice in higher education, then the paradoxical nature of the partnership relationship needs to be unpacked and examined more closely.

It is hoped that the lesson learnt from the UKZN service learning experience will be useful in preparing potential service learning partners, and reminding them to be mindful of the challenges that lie ahead. Partnerships as the context for service learning practice and research need to be problematized and not assumed as appropriate mechanisms for development. The paradoxical nature of partnerships and their unique dynamics in each developmental context means that individuals, institutions and communities require the capacity to partner. It is up to higher education institutions to develop their capacities to partner to secure the future of successful service learning within South Africa.

REFERENCES


