In pursuit of African scholarship: unpacking engagement

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Abstract   Engagement between higher education and other societal sectors is a key theme in higher education discourse in South Africa, as it is in other countries. In South Africa, however, engagement has gained additional status as an appropriate strategy for pursuing African Scholarship. On the ground, however, inequitable power relationships and erratic participation have posed serious challenges to the effectiveness and sustainability of engagement initiatives. From the experiences of seven South African academics and the local community members and service-providers with whom they engaged in service-learning, three factors emerged as mediating the power/participation dynamic of their engagement. The impact of these factors, namely, structure, meaning, and place and time, are discussed, leading to the conclusions that scholarly engagement requires ideological and practical support from higher education institutions and further study in South African contexts.

Keywords   Africanisation · Engagement · Participation · Power · Scholarship · Service-learning

Introduction

African academics have identified relevance, engagement and service in relation to this continent's environment, socio-economic conditions and needs as the essential hallmarks of higher education institutions which were not just located in Africa but fundamentally rooted in this continent (Mekoa 2004). Makgoba and Seepe (2004), for example, asserted that an African university was one which addressed African aspirations and concerns, displayed a sense of social responsibility and incorporated diverse views. The latter is particularly pertinent in the light of the subjugation within higher education of indigenous knowledge systems in favour of Western knowledge systems (Ntuli 2002), everyday

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knowledge vis à vis specialist knowledge (Fatnowna and Pickett 2002; McMillan 2002) and intuitive versus reasoned ways of knowing (Birgerstam 2002). To expose these currently undervalued sources and types of knowledge to rigorous scrutiny so as to assess their potential contributions to current African challenges, African higher education institutions must, to borrow an analogy from the African educationalist, Fafumwa, open their doors wide enough "not only to hand out knowledge but also to receive as much if not much more than it gives" (Mekoa 2004, p. 18).

To date, however, efforts to Africanise higher education have concentrated on the composition of its management, staff and students, its institutional arrangements in the national educational landscape (Jansen 2004), and, to some extent, on the integration of issues of concern to Africans into the curricula. Less attention appears to have been given to scholarship, the primary *raison d'être* of higher education. This article proceeds from the assumptions that:

- scholarship, as the core business of higher education, has to be at the heart of Africanising higher education (Posthumus 2004),
- the Scholarship of Engagement is of particular relevance for our higher education institutions,
- the academic curricula of local higher education institutions offer considerable and, as yet, underutilised scholarly opportunities for those 'in' and 'out' of academia to engage in ways which honour each constituency's production and application of knowledge, and
- the concept and practice of engagement requires critical reflection. Like other concepts which garner popular appeal, engagement is embedded with meaning and can open up or close down opportunities for those very changes we envisage as necessary for the Africanisation of higher education (Wals and Jickling 2002).

The Scholarship of Engagement is a concept popularised by the late Ernest Boyer, a prominent American educationalist, who expanded the (Western) traditional notion of scholarship as purely research—the discovery of knowledge—to include the teaching, integration and application of knowledge. A Scholarship of Engagement requires that academia and other societal role-players collaborate in scholarly activities—that, together, they seek, share, apply and preserve knowledge around social concerns (Glassick 1999). Defined by the Association of Commonwealth Universities as "strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world in … setting universities aims, purposes and priorities, … relating teaching and learning to the wider world, … the back-and-forth dialogue between researchers and practitioners, and … taking on fuller responsibilities as neighbours and citizens" (Van Wyk and Higgs 2004, p. 200), engagement must clearly have a prominent place in African higher education if the latter is to be rooted in what Letseka (2000 in Van Wyk and Higgs 2004) identified as the essentially African notions of communalism and the virtues of humaneness.

While the frequent references to engagement in many of the policy documents of South African higher education institutions (e.g. University of the Free State 2002; University of KwaZulu-Natal 2004), and its promotion by leading African scholars (e.g. Makgoba 1997) are to be applauded, indiscriminate use of the concept could obscure perpetuation of the existing obstacles to Africanisation of higher education. Indeed, academics have attested to the challenges encountered in collaborative scholarly initiatives with role-players outside their institutions (Subotzky 1999; Erasmus and Jaftha 2002; Jansen 2002; Mitchell 2002; Muller and Subotzky 2002; Bawa 2003). Issues relating to asymmetrical power relationships and erratic participation are persistent themes in their accounts. In this article, the

power and participation dynamics in collaborations around scholarship are explored. Service-learning 'partnerships' are used as they offer one instance in which engagement between higher education and other societal role players is fore grounded. Starting with a brief overview of service-learning in relation to the African university, the article then explores the dynamics of the interactions between people from different sectors of society as they formed 'project groups' to plan, implement and evaluate service-learning.

Engagement through service-learning

Service-learning is a form of academically-accredited, experiential learning in which students' texts are their experiences as they work in the real-world, usually in non-profit organisations, government structures and/or selected communities.[1] The nature of the work they undertake is determined by the communities and organisations and should, ideally, enable those organisations to further their own goals and allow knowledge to be discovered, transmitted, applied and integrated by both students and their community-based 'hosts'. Students' understanding and learning from their experiences are facilitated through structured oral and written reflection. It is a pedagogy, then, which emphasises mutually-defined, socially responsible and responsive teaching, research and service activities. It relies on meaningful, enduring partnerships between the various stakeholders in higher education and those in private, public and civic organisations/groups, recognising their multiple agendas and the necessity of an equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of participation in partnerships (University of Natal 2000).

While the name 'service-learning' has been imported from the United States of America, it is receiving significantly increased attention of late from South African academia. Tim Stanton, an American academic who has been involved in the local Service-Learning development in South Africa since 1999, called the growth of interest and expertise "a quiet revolution", noting that "in these few short years, Service-Learning has taken root in South African HEIs" (Higher Education Quality Committee 2006a, b, c, p. xxi). The increased interest in and use of service-learning can be seen, inter alia, in

- A growth in local literature and conference presentations (Henning 1998; Castle and Osman 2003; Fourie 2003; Bitzer and Menkveld 2004; Van Wyk and Daniels 2004; Osman 2005; Nduna 2006). In 2005, Bringle and Erasmus, the latter from the Universtiy of the Free State, served as guest editors for a special volume of a local academic journal containing nine articles dedicated to research about service learning in South Africa.
- The convening of local dedicated conferences, for example, at the University of Johannesburg (2005) and University of Stellenbosch (2005), and The Higher Education Quality Committee & JET Education Services organised conference in Cape Town in 2006. In June of 2006, a subsidised conference focusing on capacity-building for service-learning attracted delegates from every higher education institution in the country.
- South African contributions in American publications (McMillan 2002; Gelmon et al 2004),

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[1] In relation to higher education institutions, outside "communities" comprise those people, organisations or institutions in the private or public domain which are not part of the institutions. In this article, however, 'community' refers to historically disadvantaged, resource-poor black groups of people (Nuttall 2001).

- South African presentations at conferences elsewhere in Africa (Ng'ethe 2003) and further afield (Nuttall 2000; Hurst et al 2002; O'Brien 2003).
- The completion of post-graduate dissertations on service-learning from local universities (Trotter 2002; Mtshali 2003; Bruzas 2004; du Toit 2007) and
- The development of government policies on higher education (e.g. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) 2006 a, b) which focus on service-learning

Service-learning appears well placed to fulfill many of the goals of an African university and is being explored by local academics as a means through which to:

- access indigenous knowledge systems (Von Kotze 2004)
- increase the "knowledge, skills and ability to labour" that constitute the "human capital" necessary for sustainable livelihoods (de Gruchy 2005)
- produce applied (Mode 2 type) knowledge (Subotzky 1999)
- enhance the sustainability of both community development initiatives and of higher education institutions themselves by making more apparent their relevance (Erasmus and Jaftha 2002), and
- bring community voices into the knowledge-making arena which is currently somewhat exclusively occupied by higher education, the State and business (Bawa 2003).

The strengthening of community voices within higher education, the two-way flow of knowledge, and relationships characterised by dynamic equilibrium and equity were emphasised in the seven service-learning partnerships on which this article is based. Each partnership, known as a 'project group' comprised a community member, a service provider and an academic, who, together conceptualised and organised a service-learning course (Fig. 1).

Collectively, these courses involved 242 students working in small, single-discipline teams with many hundred community members from 40 KwaZulu Natal geographic and/or functional communities. Twenty-three organisations which provided services to these communities were also involved with the student groups (O'Brien 2003).
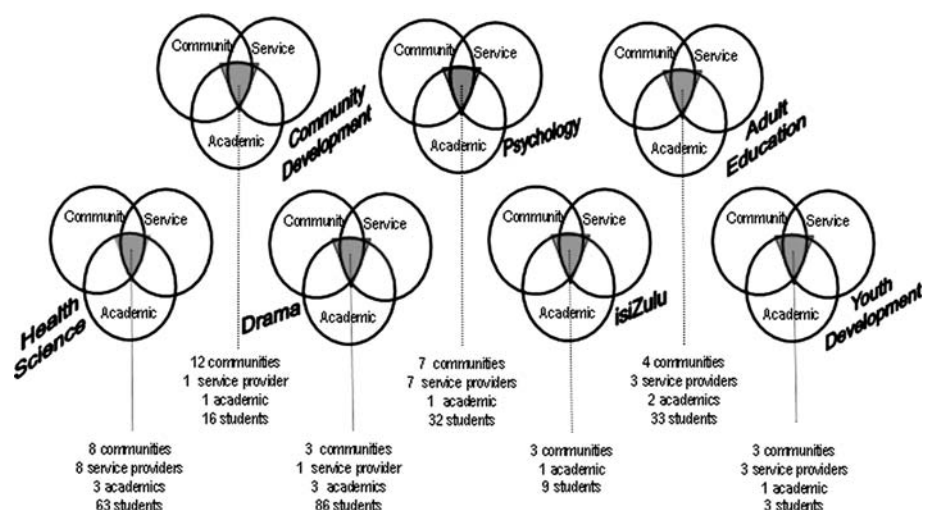

Fig. 1 Project groups & course participants

The project groups represented engagement across sectoral boundaries to jointly design and offer an academic course, which, through the students' community-based activities, would meet the priorities of each participating sector. This was an important goal, because "what community members want and what … universities are willing to offer are often at odds. And although new projects … may be guided by the campus's view of what professionals, organizations, and communities are and what they need, they rarely are built upon genuine community input" (Walshok 1999, p. 85). The rationale for the composition of these project groups was precisely to encourage such community and service-provider input into academic curricula. As shown in object A of Fig. 2, a direct correlation between participation and power was envisaged. While the different participation levels depicted in Fig. 3 (O'Brien 2003) broadly corresponded to the group members' perceptions of the influence they exerted, with academic members being most influential and community members least so, there were numerous variations within each project group. A grounded study (O'Brien ongoing), utilising discussions with the groups' members, participant observation and the documentation produced by the groups, suggested the existence of a number of mediating factors, which, singularly and in combination, impacted on the power/participation relationship. Three of these factors, namely structure, meaning and place, appeared to have a notable impact.
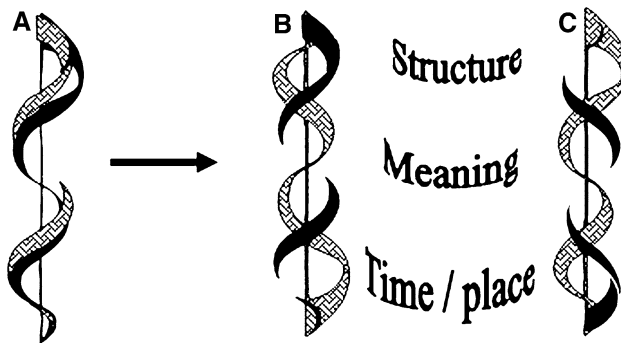

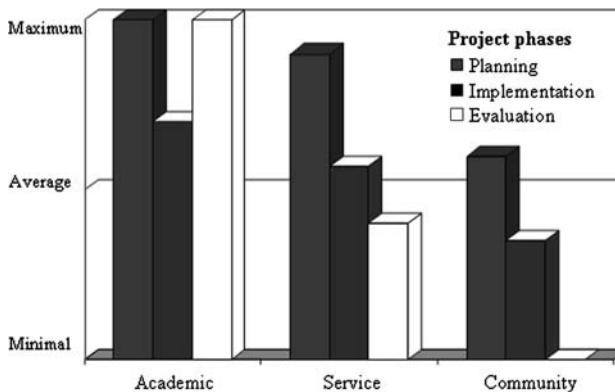**Fig. 2** Changes in the power ▌ & participation ▓ dynamic

Fig. 3 Approximate total levels of participation over the projects' three phases

Structure as mediator

Partnership initiatives which emerge naturally may well, if characterised by joint reflection by the participants on their own mutual development, organise themselves in ways which promote mutual responsibility and equity. Where, however, as was the case under discussion, the partnership formation itself is supported by an external stakeholder, the latter does not have a partnership structure with which to contract and has to chose one of the envisaged partners to kick-start the process. In this instance, the service-learning partnerships under discussion were part of a broader, national programme for the transformation of higher education. The funder thus contracted with selected institutions from this sector. By agreeing to assemble the partnership groups, drive the process, hold the funds, and monitor the projects, the higher education institution was awarded, and accepted, considerable power, and primary responsibility, in what was billed as a 'partnership'. Obviously, higher education institutions regularly enter into contracts to undertake teaching or research in return for student fees, state subsidies or payment from the private sector. In such instances, the institutions can fulfill their obligations by utilising their own resources, e.g. staff, research and teaching facilities. In this partnership, however, the institution was dependent on role-players from two other, predetermined sectors not only 'coming to the table', but also engaging at specified times in ways prescribed by the funder. When the institution's partners did not do so, there were negative consequences for the broader initiative and the academic institution. Through non-participation, or 'silence', then, the partners not under contract wielded their power, thus producing a negative correlation between power and participation (Object B in Fig. 2).

Once the initial contract had been signed, the university elicited the involvement of service providers and members of community groups to create partnership structures responsible for the co-ordinating, planning and implementation of service-learning courses. During the two-year process that followed, the uneven power within these structures was somewhat moderated by a broad commitment to certain partnership principles in relation to commitment, equity, capacity-building and respect for existing networks. However, as the initial contract between the academic institution and the funder drew to a close, the power/participation dynamic reversed when the institution unilaterally chose not to renew the contract, disengaging from what it perceived as an inequitable relationship with the funder, whose demands, the institution believed, outweighed the advantages of continued participation in the national programme. In making such a choice unilaterally, the decision-makers within the academic institution appeared to ignore the partnership structures and the democratic ethos to which the initiative aspired. The apparent silence of the participating service and community members at that stage suggested, that, in spite of their having a voice in the individual service-learning initiatives, the institution was still perceived as a big, complex and powerful organisation impervious to their voices (object C in Fig. 2). In a joint discussion subsequent to the university's cessation of involvement with the funder, a community member reflected his sector's reaction: 'The community is aggrieved even though it understands the university's decision. Was there ever a partnership in the first place? The university is big. Where are we as community? The purpose of (the whole partnership programme)—it was a new way the University was going to engage with communities. We had to pilot and implement and learn from it. Where is this learning now? What about community expectations? Is the community element an important element?' (T. Mkhize, pers. comm.)

Meaning as mediator

It was found that, just as structures and institutional processes could reverse the usual trend of greater participation yielding more power, so, too, could the meaning which participation had for each member. Certain community and service group members participated in name only (White 1996), seeking either to increase the legitimacy of their own organisations or hoping that their participation would yield some immediate advantage. Such members did not have any noticeable influence over the decisions of the other members thus negating any potential advantage from their participation. Those members who perceived their participation as an efficient way of addressing their priorities and were willing to incur immediate costs for future anticipated benefits appeared to exert more influence within the project groups than did those who participated nominally (White 1996). Further influence still was exerted by those who saw themselves as representing their organisation, community or academic discipline. Viewing their mandate as one in which their voices had to be heard in order to secure sustainability and gain leverage, they sought to influence the curricula, thereby joining those worldwide whose "involvement and contestation with their local universities about what is legitimate knowledge and what should and should not be taught … is part of a critical struggle for their survival, culturally, ethnically and territorially" (Rhea and Teasdale 2000, p. 2). The influence of those with a transformation agenda (White 1996), primarily academics, who saw their participation as a way of empowering themselves and others, tended to exert maximum power in the projects.

Wenger (1998) theorised that participation in a joint undertaking may give one a new identity, a new way in which to project oneself. Analysis of the roles performed by the project group members confirmed this assertion, to varying extents. Some of the service providers and community members undertook formal teaching activities, while academics found themselves having to combine the primarily professional role of educator with that of 'project-manager'. Assumption of the latter role was problematic in two respects. Firstly, it was not a role valued in the academic institution. In addition, the logistic arrangements and evaluation activities involved in that role are typically performed by those in authority. Indeed, the community and service project group members did perceive their academic 'partners' to be 'in charge' of the project. That assumption was often held, too, by the academic members, but rather than seeing themselves as benefiting from having greater power, they saw themselves as disadvantaged by having to carry an undue burden of responsibility. One academic member rationalised her additional responsibilities in terms of the perceived differences in benefits from participation: "With the students being the main beneficiaries of the work being done it is also expected that the academic coordinator will do the most work which leads to a different kind of frustration" (Bruzas and O'Brien 2001, p. 34).

Place and time as mediators

Place and time, in interaction with each other, constituted a third significant mediator in the power/participation dynamic. Whether understood as a geographical location or as one's position in structure, place often reflects and affects existing power dynamics. Although use of University space for meetings was generally seen as privileging the academic project group members and, thus, perpetuating broader societal stratifications, service and community project group members often willingly agreed to use this venue, possibly perceiving their choice as rational in view of the centrality of the academic courses in the

projects, or presuming that "by meeting physically in this place (university) we could then become deliberately associated with the putative authority and legitimacy of academic enterprises" (Wilson 2001, p. 234). In certain instances, community and service project group members lacked suitable alternative meeting venues. There appeared, too, to be an assumption that the institutionally-imposed daily timetable of lectures meant that academic group members were less able than the other project group members to absent themselves from their institution and, hence, had less time to travel to meetings outside the university. In reality, though, many service providers and community members had equally onerous time constraints imposed by their normal work and community commitments. These restrictions, coupled with the different places in which each project group member habitually functioned, impacted negatively on their capacity for joint participation.

During the implementation phases of the courses, when students were in direct inter-action with communities, places for participation were, predictably, more varied and became a major concern for the academic group members. Their concern was occasioned not only by the monetary costs of travelling off-campus, but by the time necessary to form relationships with individual community groups and to monitor and mentor the students at multiple community-based learning sites. These aspects of active participation had to be incorporated within a timetable of other teaching commitments, highlighting the enmeshed relationship place and time had with participation.

Choice of community sites in which students learned and worked during this phase had mostly been negotiated between the project group members and their respective sectors during the planning phase. However, a number of structural influences and "politics of position" (Tisdell 2001) intersected in decision-making about the community-based places of learning. Service and community project group members did not always enjoy a position of influence in enough communities or programmes to negotiate sufficient community-based learning sites for the number of students in any one course. In such projects, community sites were then identified by the academic group member or by the students. Choice of such sites served to alienate a few of the service and community project group members. Feeling either insufficiently involved in the decision-making or reluctant to be involved in communities outside their own, their participation in the project activities and evaluation decreased. Academic group members incurred criticism, from outside of the project groups, for undemocratic practices and perpetuation of the existing status quo.

The choice of community-based learning sites was influenced not only by the number of sites needed, but also by the project groups' understanding of 'community'. The community project group members all came from traditionally underserved black communities. Students learning about HIV/AIDS in one course, believed that by concentrating their efforts only in such communities, they would be perpetuating the myth that negative issues (in this case, HIV/AIDS) were the lot only of 'poor black people'. To what extent the predominantly 'non-black' students' argument in this project reflected more deep-seated prejudices and constituted a strategy to secure places in communities which they found less threatening, is open to conjecture. In this instance, however, the project group members changed some of the community-based learning sites to accommodate white and Indian communities equally at risk in the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic. This change of learning sites signalled a significant alteration in the traditional power relations within higher education, relations which are "present before students ever get to the door of the class-room" (Tisdell 2001, p. 150). For while academic staff typically determine what is taught and researched, in this instance the normally less influential students successfully effecting a change in the 'text' of the module.

While the 'position' of the project groups' service and community members in their own communities or workplaces impacted on their ability to secure learning opportunities for students, the status of the academic project group members affected their ability to influence views on service learning with their own institution. Bawden (1999) noted that academics involved in service-learning tended to be 'peripheral' in the sense of being newly appointed, on contract as opposed to permanent, or at a relatively low level on the academic staff ladder. Such description was accurate in relation to all but one of the academic members and was believed to account for their relatively limited influence in changing the systems and practices of their local institutions. There was evidence, however, that some impact was made, especially where the project was shown to be coherent with the department's goals: "the School has, through its engagement with this pilot study, recognised the importance of this course and the way in which it has contributed to the development of socially aware students … have made sure that is integrated into the curriculum" (Bruzas and O'Brien 2001, p. 27).

Conclusion

Analysis of the engagement of higher education teachers, community members and service providers through the medium of service-learning has highlighted the dynamic nature of the relationship between power and participation which characterises such engagement. Structural arrangements, meaning, especially in relation to participation and roles, and place and time emerged as factors which impacted on the influence exerted by, and active involvement of those collaborating in scholarly endeavours. These factors affect the extent to which the doors of local institutions are opened to community expertise and influence, and, thus, the degree to which local higher education institutions are rooted in Africa. It appears that engagement around academic curricula must be grounded within academic institutions which have reflected about and committed themselves to more equitable interaction with others. Such commitment cannot be in sentiment alone. It has to be translated into workable policies, minimized bureaucratic procedures, recognition of current efforts and adequate financial support. Equally important will be more scholarly attention to verify the effects of the mediating factors identified in this article and to identify others which promote or hinder meaningful engagement. In short, an Africanised higher education sector faces the twin challenges of more meaningful and equitable engagement with other societal sectors, together with the promotion of scholarship around engagement itself.

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