

Community Engagement in African Universities

Perspectives, Prospects
and Challenges

Edited by
Julia Preece,
Peggy Gabo Ntseane,
Oitshepile MmaB Modise
and **Mike Osborne**

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Incorporating community service learning into university-based adult education in Ghana

Michael Tagoe

Introduction

Within the last decade, higher education institutions have been going through flux as their method of working shifts towards the concept of community engagement. This transformation is in response to the previously poor attention given to extension work as contributing to the 'third mission'. Extension work is the original term adopted by many universities for working outside the university with communities who would otherwise not have engaged with the institution.

While universities in Ghana have practised community involvement since their establishment, they have often treated communities as 'pockets of need, laboratories for experimentation, or passive recipients of expertise' (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002, p. 504). Changing the dynamics of the relationship between universities and communities has led to an emphasis on the incorporation of community service learning into mission statements and courses in order to re-configure teaching and learning and empower students to apply their knowledge to addressing real-life problems. Boyer (1996, pp. 19–20) has also challenged universities to bring new dignity to community engagement by connecting its rich resources 'to our most pressing social, civic, and political and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers, to our cities.'

Most of the studies on community service learning have focused on universities in South Africa, the USA, Australia, Asia and the UK, and on courses such

as political science, social work, journalism, psychology and business administration at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, the community service learning movement has had very little effect on adult education (Kiely *et al.*, 2006). In this chapter, we examine how community service learning could be integrated into university-based adult education courses to transform teaching and learning for the faculty and for students. Specifically, we argue that although adult education as a discipline has contributed significantly to models used in community service learning, the interface between adult education and community service learning has been weak. It is within this context that we discuss the benefits that could be derived if community service learning were integrated into adult education as a discipline.

Community engagement and universities

Universities all over the world have fostered a relationship with society. Apart from teaching and learning, which often takes place on the campuses, links with society are facilitated through research and extension service. Extension service, the 'third mission' of most universities, has undergone reforms recently as universities try to redefine their role in dealing with societal challenges. The massive support for this university–community engagement is rooted in Boyer's notion of the scholarship of engagement. Since the 1990s, the call by Boyer (1990, 1996) for universities to rediscover their roots and to address societal problems has brought engagement to the forefront of university activities, especially in developed and some developing countries.

Various definitions have been offered to describe this university–community partnership. Ramaley (2003, p. 18) defines engagement as 'an educational or research initiative conducted through some form of partnership and characterised by shared goals, a shared agenda, agreed upon definitions of success that are meaningful both to the university and the community participants ... The resulting collaboration or partnership is mutually beneficial and is likely to build the capacity and competence of all parties.' In its report on the engaged institution, the Kellogg Commission on The Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999, p. 1) defines engagement as the 'redesign of teaching, research and extension and service functions to become more systematically and productively involved with community concerns and needs.' Wallis (2006) sees community engagement as a two-way relationship that leads to productive partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes. According to Wallis (*ibid.*) and Wallis *et al.* (2005), community engagement

is much more than community participation, consultation, development or service.

Bell *et al.* (2007) offer examples of community engagement activities, which include:

- Community-based learning: students learn academic content in community settings through partnership-designed activities that provide specific knowledge benefits to a particular community. This type of learning is credit bearing and curriculum based, and it is fully integrated into a student's course of study
- Community-based research: involves collaborative research in which university staff, students and the community work together to design, conduct and report on research undertaken. The research is of both intellectual and community importance and the products of engaged research are of demonstrable benefit to the academy and the community
- Partnerships between university and external organisations: are focused on a mutually designed agenda to address specific community needs or opportunities through collaborative work in which each partner contributes essential expertise. External organisations include business, industry, government, community-based/non-profit enterprises and education.

Fourie (2006) shares the same view as Bell *et al.*, (2007). However, he argues that engagement in teaching and learning ought to reflect local and African history, context, circumstances and problems, as well as opportunities for life-long learning, professional development and civic development.

Community service learning

Since Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey coined the term in 1967 at the Southern Regional Education Board in the USA, service learning has attracted much attention but little consensus over a universally accepted definition (Giles and Eyler, 1994). Two important definitions (Jacoby, 1999; Bringle and Hatcher, 1995) are critical to our understanding of what service learning is. Jacoby defines service learning:

... as a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together

with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service learning. (Jacoby, 1999, p. 20)

Bringle and Hatcher define service learning as a:

... course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995, p. 112)

In South Africa, the Joint Education Trust (JET, 2001) has adapted Bringle and Hatcher's definition in programme documents by stating that service learning is a 'thoughtful, organised and reflective service-oriented pedagogy', adding that it is 'focused on the development priorities of communities through the interaction between and application of knowledge, skills and experience in partnership between community, academics, students, and service providers within the community for the benefit of all participants' (Joint Education Trust, 2001, cited in Hatcher and Erasmus, 2008, p. 50). Again in South Africa, Fourie (2006, p. 44), quoting the definition of community service learning at the University of the Free State, argues that it is:

... curriculum-based, credit bearing educational experiences, in which students (a) participate in contextualised, well-structured and organised service-learning activities aimed at meeting identified development and service needs in a community, and (b) reflect on the service activities in order to gain a deeper understanding of curriculum content and community life as well as achieve personal growth and a sense of social responsibility. (Fourie, 2006, p. 44)

Essentially, what these definitions reveal is that service learning is primarily an academic enterprise (Bringle and Hatcher, 1999). While other forms of service programmes such as volunteerism, community service, internships and field education may have some educational benefits, service learning deliberately integrates community service activities with educational objectives and ensures equal focus to the provider and the recipient (Furco, 2007; Berle, 2006; Bringle and Hatcher, 2009). According to Jacoby (1996, p. 20), the term

'community' refers to 'local neighbourhoods, the state, the nation, and the global community'. The human and community needs that service learning addresses are those needs that are defined by the community.

A community service learning model

The theoretical roots of community service learning have been traced to John Dewey's works, *How We Think and Experience Education* (cited in Giles and Eyler, 1994) and *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916). Although Dewey never mentioned service learning in his works, his experimentalism with an emphasis on the principles of experience, enquiry and reflection have been identified as the key elements of a theory of service learning (Giles and Eyler, 1994). Dewey's legacy to service learning is about how learning takes place, what learning is, and the relation of learning to action (Giles and Eyler, 1994). Experiential learning as a philosophy of education is based on what Dewey (1938, cited in Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 193) called a 'theory of experience.'

Dewey believed that experiences contribute to learning, but cautioned that not all experiences were educative. Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions (Bringle and Hatcher, 1999). For experience to be truly educative, Dewey suggests the use of projects as a means to produce learning from experience and (cited in Giles and Eyler 1994, p. 80) sets forth four situations that are necessary for 'projects to be truly educative'. First, they must generate interest in the learner; second, they must be intrinsically worthwhile to the learner; third, they must present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information; and fourth, they must cover a considerable time span and be capable of fostering development over time.

Freire (1972), a critical adult educator, reflects Dewey's position in supporting the need for experience to be incorporated in teaching and learning. He argues that when experience is not embedded in teaching, students are filled with a stockpile of deposited knowledge which often leaves them disengaged from the learning process and alienated from their social world. For Freire, apart from this type of education stifling critical reflection and critical thinking, students are unable to truly become human. It is true knowledge – that comes through invention and reinvention through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry – that results in creativity and transformation. Situating experience in learning gives students the opportunity to put theory into practice. It

allows them to reflect on the educational content and its relevance to the wider society.

To Dewey, thinking and action are inextricably linked. As cited in Bringle and Hatcher (1999), Dewey provides the foundation for the role that reflection assumes in the learning process and the bridge it provides between experience and theory. According to Dewey, reflection is an 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it' (cited in Bringle and Hatcher, 1999, p. 112). Kolb (1984) and Kolb and Kolb have built on the propositions of Dewey and Freire in their experiential learning theory, which is founded on six propositions (Kolb and Kolb 2005, p. 194):

1. Learning is ... a process and not [just an] outcome. To improve learning in higher education, students ... [need to engage in the process and provide feedback on their experiences].
2. All learning is relearning. Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas.
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Conflicts, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process. [Students] move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world ... learning [goes beyond cognition to include the affective, spiritual and behavioural aspects of personality development].
5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

Apart from reflection, one other important element in service learning is reciprocity. In an attempt to distinguish service learning from other forms of volunteerism, writers have consistently emphasised the relevance of reciprocity (Henry and Breyfogle, 2006). If reflection is seen as the foremost factor that distinguishes service learning from community service and volunteerism, Kendall (1990, cited in Henry and Breyfogle, 2006, p. 27) describes reciprocity as the second vital factor to defining an activity as a service learning experience. Reciprocity is the exchange of both giving and receiving between the 'server' and the person or group 'being served.' All parties in

service learning are learners and help determine what is to be learned. Reciprocity in service learning overcomes the traditional paternalistic, one-way approach to service in which one group provides the service and the other group becomes the recipient. Lamsam (1999) has explained that reciprocity in service learning allows both university and community to be teachers and learners. Each has something to offer and to learn from the other. The community teaches students, while they also learn from the students. Hoxmeier and Lenk (2003) have argued that reciprocity is a 'win-win' aspect of the service learning contract. Each participating party experiences net benefits from their involvement.

University-based adult education at the University of Ghana

University extension, according to Lambie and Thompson (2000), began in Oxford and Cambridge in England in the mid-nineteenth century. Later, university extension, known as 'extra-mural' work, became part of the university colleges established in British-colonised African countries. The transfer of models of university extension and university-based adult education in Africa could be traced to three bodies established in the 1940s, namely: the Asquith Commission on Higher Education in the Colonial Territories, the Elliot Commission and the Bradley Committee – all of which urged that extra-mural departments be established as part of the university colleges in British West Africa to develop adult education (Raybould, 1956; Amedzro, 2004).

The Asquith Commission Report which, together with other reports, laid the theoretical foundation for higher education in the colonies, explained that universities could only bring about development if, apart from teaching undergraduates and sponsoring research, they undertook a 'leading part in the development of adult education' (cited in Agbodeka, 1998, p. 73). Indeed, the Bradley Report stressed the need for an extra-mural department, which would integrate the life of the university with that of society (Amedzro, 2004). The idea of extension (that is, adult education) becoming the third role of universities after teaching and research was gradually accepted in the UK during the 1940s (Agbodeka, 1998). Of the universities in Britain in the 1940s, Oxford University had an elaborate adult education programme for the working class, and the Bradley Report therefore suggested emulating this practice by initiating extra-mural studies in the Gold Coast (Amedzro, 2004).

In Ghana, as part of the preparations for establishing the University College of the Gold Coast, the authorities came to accept the important role of extension

and therefore decided to include extra-mural studies as one of the early departments. It was a decision that was designed to help to build the intellectual capacity of the nation. It was argued that teaching undergraduates and sponsoring research might increase physical resources but could not match the role of extension in raising the intellectual standards of the nation at large (Agbodeka, 1998). To promote the university's role in community affairs, a Department of Extra-Mural Studies was established in 1948 to focus more on extension services than teaching (Fordham, 2000). The department became the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies when it was incorporated into the University College of the Gold Coast in 1949 as the extension wing of the university college. It had two major objectives for its establishment. Firstly, it was to provide opportunities that would arouse the people's interest in and consciousness of education. This would then lead to the foundation of an adult education organisation and help members to participate in their political and social lives more meaningfully. Secondly, the experiment was to illustrate the type of link that could be established between a university college or university and the larger community (Hagan, cited in Amedzro, 2004, p. 50).

The whole idea of extension was service to society. From 1949 to the time of independence, the department provided opportunities to ordinary people who could not participate in the regular programmes of the university colleges in Africa. It provided liberal studies in politics and government, history, economics, public affairs and international relations to provide opportunities for individual improvement (Jones-Quartey, 1975). It also provided opportunities for the university college to have a presence in the communities through community development programmes. This was done in Ghana through the People's Educational Association (PEA), a voluntary association similar to the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) in Britain (Skinner, 2007).

In the 1950s, several monumental events happened in the Gold Coast, starting with independence, which was attained in 1957, and the formation of the first civilian government.

Independence set the stage for structural transformation of all sectors of the economy. In the area of university education, the Convention People's Party (CPP) under Dr Kwame Nkrumah changed the status of the University College of the Gold Coast to a fully fledged university. It became the University of Ghana in 1961. The Department of Extra-Mural Studies became the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies in 1957 and then the Institute of Public Education in 1962. According to Dr Nkrumah, 'True academic freedom – the intellectual

freedom of the university – is everywhere fully compatible with service to the community; for the university is, and must always remain, a living, thinking and serving part of the community to which it belongs' (*Daily Graphic*, 1974, p. 17). Armed with this truth about the role of the university for the community, Dr Nkrumah initiated far-reaching reforms in the university to achieve his objectives. These changes reflected a new outlook in the services provided by the university-based adult education institution. The provision of non-certificated programmes gave way to certificated courses as demanded by ordinary Ghanaians through the workers' colleges in Accra, Sekondi-Takoradi, Tamale and Kumasi, established by the CPP Government. The overthrow of the CPP Government in 1966 also marked some changes in the provision of university-based adult education.

After 1966, the Institute of Public Education was renamed the Institute of Adult Education. It redeemed its academic orientation when it established a research and teaching unit to teach its own discipline. A Diploma in Adult Education programme and an MA/MPhil programme were then introduced in 1987 to train middle-level adult educators. During this period, teaching and research were added to the core function of extension service. As part of its extension services, the institute continues to offer community-based programmes in areas such as environmental management, population and family life education, including HIV/AIDS, as well as income-generation skills training for various interest groups all over the country. In the 1990s, the institute finally severed all links with remedial courses for students and focused more on degree programmes. Today, the Institute of 'Adult' Education has become the Institute of 'Continuing and Distance' Education, offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in adult education.

Why community service learning in adult education?

Of all the disciplines, adult education lends itself most readily to community service learning, because it is about community development and people. Adult education has always been about social transformation. It has been identified as vital for fostering ecologically sustainable development, for promoting democracy, justice and gender equity, and supporting scientific, social and economic development. It helps to build a world in which violent conflict is replaced by dialogue and a culture of peace based on justice (UNESCO, 1997). At the CONFINTEA V conference, adult education was defined as:

... the entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society. (UNESCO, 1997, p. 29)

Learning is the bedrock of adult education and therefore the teaching of courses needs to promote learning between students and communities. Additionally, adult education focuses on solving societal problems and therefore has always promoted social change. The objectives of adult education and community service learning are thus interrelated. Kiely *et al.* (2006) have argued that, as a pedagogy, service learning goes beyond the classroom into the community and provides adult learners with innovative experiential approaches to teaching and learning. They further posit that community problems, rather than predetermined textbooks and syllabuses, emerge as living texts driving theory and practice in service learning courses. As adult learners reflect and engage with many stakeholders, they make contributions to the pedagogy of service learning (Kiely, 2004).

Since service learning programmes place participants directly in potentially unfamiliar local and global community contexts, there are some courses offered that could have a substantial impact on community service learning and around which community-based programmes could be developed. These include contemporary issues in adult education; methodology of educational research; programme planning and evaluation; community education and development; human resource management and development; and gender and development. There would be several benefits to be derived if the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education promoted service learning courses. For faculty members, Bringle and Hatcher (1995) have argued that service learning brings new life to the classroom by invigorating their teaching. The typical 'banking education' is replaced with 'problem-posing education' (Freire, 1972). Furco (2001) has argued that faculty members benefit significantly when service learning is incorporated into their research.

In the twenty-first century, more attention is being paid to community-based participatory forms of research as an alternative to the dominant approach to research (Ahmed *et al.*, 2004; Minkler, 2004; Hall, 2009). Community-based, participatory research is a collaborative enterprise between academics and community members. Since successful service learning experiences

are founded upon university–community partnerships, this type of research allows local people to influence the design and shape the scope of the research agenda.

For students, service learning has a positive effect on intellectual skills, personal development, personal confidence, leadership skills, team work, sense of ethics, moral development and increased social awareness (Jacoby, 1999; Stukas *et al.*, 1999; Colby *et al.*, 2009; Butin, 2006; Smith, 2008; Deeley, 2010). Service learning affords students a vision of career development, and a glimpse of what kind of work they can expect to do after graduation (Tan and Philips, 2005). Deeley (2010) has also indicated that service learning contributes to writing and oral skills.

Although the benefits that accrue to communities have been under-researched (Mitchell and Humphries, 2007), it is quite obvious that apart from providing the ambience for research by faculty members and learning sites for students, communities may benefit from service learning as owners and carriers of local knowledge. In many developing countries where indigenous knowledge has been sidelined by the university, the promotion of service learning would empower owners of knowledge to participate in finding solutions to their own problems (Semali *et al.*, 2006; Semali and Maretzki, 2004).

What needs to be done to integrate community service learning?

The Institute of Continuing and Distance Education perceives extension services as its core mandate, in addition to teaching and research, and has offered community service since its establishment. However, its strategic plan does not mention community engagement and community service learning. Nor are there communities collaborating with university departments for the mutual beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Oaks *et al.*, 2009). Various strategies have been offered to help universities and institutions promote course-related, community service learning projects. For community service learning to serve as an effective tool that would survive the test of time, it needs careful planning and commitment (Cone and Harris, 1996). One strategy to achieve this is the comprehensive action plan for service learning (CAPSL) developed by Bringle and Hatcher (1996, 2000).

CAPSL 'provides a heuristic for guiding the development of a service learning programme in higher education' (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, p. 236). It does so by focusing attention on four constituencies (institution, faculty, students and community) that must be considered and that provide a framework for institutions to develop their strategic plans. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) call for a self-assessment at the planning stage to find out: where the institution is, and where it is going; the institutional, student and faculty culture, climate and values; the resources and obstacles for developing service learning in the institution. At institution level, there needs to be a small group of key individuals or champions with the appropriate interest, motivation and skills. Once we have key individuals, there is need for a strategic action plan to implement service learning. The strategic plans of institutions should have community engagement and community service learning embedded in their mission statements.

Holland (1997) has argued that the association between an institution's mission and service learning is the most significant factor in successful introduction of service learning. Holland further posits that 'each institution must develop its own understanding of the degree to which service is an integral component of the academic mission' (Holland, 1997, p. 30). Young *et al.* (2007) have noted that both CAPSL and Holland's advice can be useful in assessing an institution's initial engagement in service learning and how that institution could later move from one level of commitment to another. Such tracking of activities could shed light on how service learning is initiated and institutionalised.

Although the recent study by Vogel *et al.* (2010) focuses on factors that influence the long-term sustainability of service learning, it identifies three factors that have emerged as key to the institutionalisation of service learning. The first of these relates to the institution's characteristics and policies, including the centrality of service to the institution's mission and the recognition given to service learning, teaching in general, and community-engaged research in faculty promotion, tenure and hiring policies. Second is the creation of resources and infrastructure to support service learning, including professional development opportunities and incentives to support faculty participation, dedicated institutional funding, a coordinating centre for service learning that is centrally placed within the academic structure of the institution, and the integration of service learning into the curriculum. Third are strategic activities, including strategic planning for institutionalisation of service learning, articulating how service learning helps advance broader institutional initiatives and priorities, and vocal support for service learning among high-level administrators and faculty members.

Conclusion

This chapter reveals the position of the Institute of Continuing and Distance Education in Ghana and the potential for incorporating a community service learning component into its activities. The institute regards extension service as its core mandate, and yet this third mission has seen little transformation. There is no strategic action plan for community engagement and there are virtually no courses that are related to community service learning.

Nevertheless, the literature review reveals that there are several benefits that might accrue to faculty and students. This is why the institute needs to clearly define a creative partnership with the community to address complex needs in communities through the application of knowledge. This partnership must be backed by effective institutional policy, and champions to sell the idea and make sure that the necessary curricular changes to incorporate community service learning into courses are introduced.

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