

A case study of Phumani Paper as a Community Engagement initiative at the University of Johannesburg¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a case-study that shows a degree of incompatibility between community engagement and Institutional research culture. The paper draws on the experience of managing a national community programme through the bureaucratic structures of a tertiary institution. It evaluates the outcomes of a poverty alleviation programme funded by government that began with idealistic aims – to use the University environment to transfer new research and technologies for rural development, and establish hand papermaking as a new cultural industry in South Africa. The research component set out to challenge the rigid boundaries that often exist between formal and informal learning environments. The findings show that the link between Phumani Paper and its core research and teaching programme has the potential to transform relationships between higher education and the community. Furthermore, the ‘transformational’ nature of that relationship has the ability to open a window of activity which is rapidly closing as a result of more conservative scientific practices being favoured in the merged institution of University of Johannesburg.

Key Words: Community Engagement, Participatory Action Research, Visual arts and economic empowerment

Introduction

For the purpose of this paper I will refer to the “community engagement” project of PP as a participatory action research methodology that engages a more radical pedagogy than “service learning,” which I will refer to as the “add-on” activity, or third leg, of higher education. I draw a distinction between the definition of CSL as peripheral to the main functions of teaching and research.

As a senior lecturer in the Fine Art Department at the University of Johannesburg for the past decade, I have been engaged in an invigorating and challenging process of linking research activities with community engagement and artistic practice. This process has opened a dynamic educational arena that has required a rethinking of the way knowledge is taught and retained, and has created spaces for pedagogic practices that are radical and innovative. However, these practices have encountered continual resistance from the gatekeepers who work within a hierarchical educational

¹ Note: This article is adapted from the unpublished paper: *Glimpses of Transformation in Institutional Culture at the University of Johannesburg: A case study of Phumani Paper*: South African Arts Historians 22nd Annual Conference, Vaal University of Technology, 7-10 September 2006

infrastructure. I will argue that the case study to be discussed, Phumani Paper, had challenged the more limited notion of “Community Service Learning” (conceived of as “service to community”²), and instead has promoted a more engaged, participatory framework that prioritises community development and a non-hierarchical pedagogical practice.

In 1997, the term “community service” was defined in the Joint Education Trust’s concept paper on *Community Service in Higher Education* as:

Programmes linked to higher education that involve participants in activities designed to deliver social benefits to a particular community in ways that teach the participants to work jointly towards achieving a common goal. Participation in community service usually involves a degree of personal sacrifice in terms of time, remuneration and convenience. (Perold and Omar, 1997:3)

In contrast, I would like to share a case study of how our community engagement programme, Phumani Paper, adapted and challenged this overly broad and yet limiting understanding of community service.

When founded in 1998, Phumani Paper (PP) received significant funding from the government, as well as support from the former Technikon Witwatersrand, because its activities were seen as directly related to the stated mission of higher education, i.e., a ‘commitment to quality teaching, scholarship and research [that is] responsible to the developmental needs of society’ (Perold and Omar, 1997:6). At present, Perold and Omar’s broad definition has been narrowed to an approach of engaged learning that considers ‘community service’ to be a distinctive third leg of higher education’s mission (along with teaching and research). With this approach, responsiveness to societal needs is in danger of becoming an add-on activity, peripheral to the two central functions of teaching and research. In contrast, at Phumani Paper, the initial definition of ‘community engagement’ was expanded to include new, more radical methodologies such as Participatory Action Research.

In this paper I will argue that the link between Phumani Paper and the University’s core research and teaching functions demonstrates the potential to transform relationships between higher education institutions and the community. I argue further that the transformative nature of that relationship opens a window of activity that has since closed with the merger of the Technikon Witwatersrand (henceforth TWR) with the Rand Afrikaanse Universiteit (henceforth RAU) to form the University of Johannesburg.

Hand-papermaking at the Technikon Witwatersrand: the Papermaking Development and Research Unit (PDRU), 1999-2005

I initiated papermaking as a small research project linked to the printmaking department at the former TWR. All printmaking rag papers in South Africa are imported, and the establishment in 1992 of Artist Proof Studio (a community art centre in Newtown, central Johannesburg) sought to make printmaking an affordable and accessible medium for all printmakers in and outside the University context. In the 1980s, when I studied for my Masters degree at the School of the Museum

² ‘service to community’ defined by Perold and Omar in 1997

of Fine Arts in Boston, papermaking had been offered as part of the Fine Art curriculum. However, as there was not much of a precedent for this course in South Africa, I concluded that hand-papermaking would not only provide archival printing paper more affordably, but would also present an opportunity for research and development, as we had to design and build locally-made equipment and tools. The Papermaking Research and Development Unit (PRDU) has enjoyed funding support from the National Research Foundation (NRF) and University Research Committee (URC) for the past nine years. Accordingly, I involved all my senior printmaking students in experimenting with papermaking, and was then able to support their further studies through post graduate funding from the NRF. The students were also involved in teaching practice and outreach, and we received a grant in 1997 from an inter-university competition to establish a small papermaking project for poverty alleviation in Winterveldt (North-West province). This was the first instance of community engagement that involved students' teaching directly from their research investigations.

In 1998 I was able to go on a research visit to a papermaking project in Ecuador, where I visited a small village that was dependent on the farming of Cubaya or sisal fibre for the weaving of coffee bags for their livelihoods. Coca Cola had come in and replaced sisal bags with plastics, and the local industry was wiped out. In response, Care International, in collaboration with Rutgers University and Dieu Donné, a papermaking studio in NY, had established a papermaking project to process the tons of cubaya fibre into pulp and paper. This project served as the inspiration to propose expanding the hand-papermaking project and to founding Phumani Paper as an appropriate industry for processing agri-waste in South Africa.

I was fortunate to initiate this project when I did. During its 'transitional' phase, South African educational policy, through the publication of the White Paper of 1997, directed tertiary institutions to engage with community outreach projects as part of its Reconstruction and Development programme. During its brief history as a research unit, Phumani Paper reflected and explored a space of "imagination and transformation" in Higher Education. Phumani Paper was a programme designed to prioritise inclusion, access, diversity, and collaborative knowledge production, with the overall goal of nation-building. It operated from 1999 to 2005 as a progressive programme funded by the Department of Science and Technology (DST). At that time, the DST encouraged a role for higher education in the appropriate transfer of technology and knowledge that would have a positive impact on job creation and poverty alleviation. The Department facilitated the linking of research with new technologies that could support the establishment of a new industry such as hand-papermaking. Because the development of hand-papermaking as a new cultural industry required collaboration and partnerships between government, higher education, communities, and the NGO sector, it promoted multi-disciplinary approaches to the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

The window that opened in 1999 allowed space for the imagination to soar. The proposal that I submitted to government was ambitious, and the Department of Science and Technology awarded R3m to create 460 new jobs in hand-papermaking. In nine months, the papermaking poverty alleviation programme that is now known as Phumani Paper (isiZulu for 'reach out'), established 21 papermaking projects in seven of South Africa's nine provinces. Each province would make paper from the natural resources of the region: for example, maize in the Free State, banana stem in Limpopo Province, milkweed from an informal settlement in Gauteng, Port-Jackson willow, an

invader plant in the Western Cape, and so on. The breadth of the proposal allowed creative energy to mix with the idealistic vision of the Department of Education's first White Paper, which envisioned a central role for higher education in the transition to a democratic state.

During the merger between RAU and TWR, the University administration at the time made the decision to end its engagement with Phumani Paper. This decision has led to my concern that the radical vision of the late 1990s has disappeared from South African educational theory and policy. My opinion was confirmed by a lecture given in 2005 by Prof Ahmed Bawa, Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of KZN on "*Re-imagining South African Higher Education in the Image of a Liberated South Africa*". Bawa argued that over the past decade of ANC leadership, the Higher Education system has failed to imagine the transformational potential of the 1997 White Paper. The transformation of the University as a social institution is a very large and important subject, one which, as Bawa pointed out, would have to include the nature of knowledge and its production. Unfortunately, this core topic has not been addressed, much less investigated. Instead, he argued that after twelve years of democracy, we have not seen any fundamental changes in the educational system. On the contrary, Bawa implied that a regressive re-racialisation of the student bodies has occurred.

What are the implications of the merger between the TWR and RAU as the University of Johannesburg for community engagement and 'public scholarship'? UJ claims to be a comprehensive institution that offers both 'career focussed' and academic programmes. It also claims to be an 'engaged' University. However, the standards now adopted for academic legitimacy as a world-class institution are those of traditional American or European research universities, and moreover, the standards for research are established through measuring our textual output in peer-reviewed international journals. One might be inclined to conclude that the ANC government's neo-liberal economic policies have been mirrored by the re-colonisation of higher education through the imposition of rigid standards based on the most conservative of western models.

In contrast, more progressive western scholarship has developed new standards and methodologies. For example, the scholar Reason (2006) argues that knowledge creation is best encouraged through Participatory Action Research, defined as "... a participatory, democratic process ... (that) seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others" (Reason and McArdle, 2006: 3). Emphasising creativity, these practices initiate dialogues that generate alternative ideas and options for action, while fostering transformation of the participants in the process. "The art of the dialogic process is to share authority." (Lippard quoting Jack Tschen: 2005: xxv). In contrast to a model that sees educators as the possessors of knowledge which they have to impart to, activist-educators are co-creators and active constructors of new knowledge.

Given this split between regressive and progressive educational philosophies, there is an urgent need in higher education today for a substantive discussion about the role of universities in nation-building, in entrenching democracy, in maintaining a culture of human rights, and in developing citizenship. In other words, I argue that our challenge is to open a world with all its complexities to students and collaborators, where we learn to democratize rather than colonise experience, using principles of non-hierarchical participation and self-reflexive practices. The Masters degree students I have supervised since the inception of the PDRU have demonstrated the efficacy of such an approach.

Graduate Training at the PDRU: a brief case study of engaged education

According to activist educator Mohanty (2003:201), "... the pedagogy [of dissent] does not entail merely processing received knowledges... but also actively transforming knowledges...". It is my contention that artists cultivate or possess the qualities needed to transform knowledge. Artists in their own practice are able to abandon what does not work and create innovations that take the system in a new direction. They can embrace risk and let go of the familiar. They can challenge themselves to stretch beyond comfortable limits, and they are careful not to become too entrenched in the habits that have worked in the past. They are also able to make use of whatever material is at hand, valuing the creative potential of such materials and using them in a purposeful and coherent way.

What follows is a first-hand example of how Phumani Paper became a forum to engage with the exciting challenge of transformative educational practice in the former TWR. After Phumani Paper received its initial funding, our nascent research unit was allocated a basement venue in the deteriorating Marydale building, which flooded during rains and was freezing in winter. Down in that basement 'research laboratory', printmaking students worked not just at the grassroots, but in the muddy ditch of emerging knowledge, stripping bark off various plants and carefully recording the optimal procedures for turning those plants into paper. They proved to be outstanding researchers, exploring fields as different as chemistry and design in order to develop paper and paper products from a wide-variety of plant materials. Moreover, they had to become educators in order to teach papermaking skills to the members of the 20 Phumani Paper units. The challenge for these students, who after all had entered school to be trained as practising artists, was enormous, but they were stimulated and empowered by their ability to create new knowledge. In the end, four of the Master's degree students' research projects have proved to be essential to establishing sustainable processes within the Phumani Paper enterprise. Their projects included the use of cotton and sisal for archival paper production, the recycling of invasive plant species for sustainable cultural development, and the development of paper-based technologies such as paper-clay and cast paper pulp for three-dimensional craft production.

By establishing links with the departments of Engineering and Chemistry, and recruiting students and/or commissioning projects from Graphic Design and Industrial Design, we discovered the enormous value of interdisciplinary research. Yet despite their innovative and groundbreaking work, three Masters students' research projects were dismissed by South African external examiners, who asserted that their dissertations did not fit into the Fine Art format on the one hand, or comply with a social science model on the other. It was therefore necessary to have these projects re-examined by more progressive academics, both local and international. Ultimately, two of these students were awarded their Masters degrees cum-laude. The other thesis, which was completed by the first black Master's graduate in our Faculty, established benchmarks for a practice-based participatory research methodology that is especially suited, in my opinion, to the South African context.

The fundamental challenge in this experiential, interdisciplinary research has been to find a balance between the external goal of poverty alleviation and the educational goal of graduate degrees. Unfortunately, the type of mindset entrenched in and driving the bureaucracy of the institution was the largest obstacle to progress. This model did not fit into the existing Community Engagement

programmes, which consisted of student volunteer service, work-study programmes and placements, campus community outreach programmes and extension services, or curriculum-related programmes that are credit bearing.

Apart from the inflexible university bureaucracy, there were also considerable constraints on Phumani Paper that were set by governmental funding requirements. Although the grant offered exciting possibilities for educational innovation as well as social transformation, in the end, extensive damage was caused by the government- imposed goals for job creation. Although Phumani Paper met these requirements in terms of number of jobs created, in my opinion the government's short-sighted priorities undercut the prospect of sustainability. Government support ended too quickly, and it became increasingly evident that it is not effective to simply dump a concept of grassroots entrepreneurship in the form of a poverty-alleviation project on people in rural areas, especially if there is no integration within the local community culture. Sustainability depends on building human capacity and agency along with business skills. Nonetheless, despite these significant drawbacks the Phumani Paper project has been moderately successful.³

I argue that the window allowing fresh air to sweep through Higher Education institutions has progressively closed in the past few years, with the result that the Phumani Paper programme was forced to separate from the academy in 2005 as I believe it was seen to be a liability. The blinkered vision of the former RAU financial administration, which could not easily accommodate the payments to the projects, presented such obstacles to growth that Phumani Paper legally separated from UJ in the merger. All salary contracts of 32 Phumani staff members were terminated with the university, and Phumani Paper was re-established as a Section 21 company. The University lawyers drafted a lease agreement recommending that Phumani Paper pays rental for its continued occupation of the UJ campus. The organisation took a damaging blow from this process of separation and has been struggling to recover from the fallout ever since.

In order to continue to legitimate Phumani Paper as a valuable learning opportunity for students, I have since established student exchange programmes with universities in the United States. One might consider this to be ironic, as some of the most regressive of South Africa's current policies have been formulated by South Africans modelling their system on American institutions of higher education, established when American institutions of higher education were all-white and segregated by gender. Today, the American educational system is far more flexible and open, and I have been able to find programmes at the University of Michigan, Brandeis University, Rutgers University and others that could accommodate non-traditional arts- based learning. The University of Michigan's 'Imagining America' programme, founded by Prof. Ellison, has been especially influential on my own thinking. A nation-wide programme, 'Imagining America' puts engaged learning at the heart of pedagogy and scholarship.

Countering this positive development is the growing corporatisation of both American and South African universities in the age of free-market capitalism and 'privatisation'. The new mandate for

3 The central office at Phumani Paper (Section 21 company) on the UJ Doornfontein campus serves as a sales and resource centre, accessing markets to support producer units nationally. Seven years since its inception in October 1999, there are 16 units still operating nationally, and the new focus for Research and Development roll out is the establishment of archival acid free papermaking. The Dept of Art and Culture has promised to invest significant funding to establish this as a flagship project of archival paper supply to heritage institutions in Africa.

'merged institutions' provided a rationale for and 'longing to return to basic values and foundational beliefs', as institutions with very different histories and functions attempted to find common ground. American academic Taylor (2001:31) has argued that such nostalgic thinking does not lead to universal equality, but instead tends to establish new hierarchies and to reinforce old inequalities. It is my fear that the University of Johannesburg is approximating a closed, hierarchical system, which is now promoting or privileging traditional scholarly research and publication over experiential learning and community engagement. Indeed, it seems that the more research is engaged with community, the less it is accorded academic value. The gap between academia and activism will never be bridged unless new definitions of research are developed that are consonant with the radical innovations in our concept of knowledge production that have occurred over the past generation.

At present, the theoretical resources informing social and cultural analysis seem exhausted and alternative interpretive strategies have yet to be defined. Part of the rationale for this journey is the urgent challenge to find new ways of resisting outmoded systems and institutional structures that repress otherness, reduce difference, and impose conformity. In my own research and practice, I am attempting to bridge the growing divide between engaged experiential and participative learning and educational theory.

The challenge then, in our context, is for Higher Education institutions, including the faculty, department and post-graduate supervisors, to be able to accommodate, supervise and provide evaluation guidelines for such undertakings. My past experience with the supervision of Masters students who were involved in publicly engaged projects revealed that our current guidelines for evaluating the generic Masters of Fine Art student at UJ are inadequate. The questions I have been grappling with are: how do we penetrate the rigidity of the system to arrive at a more flexible model? And, what are the questions the evaluator should ask when assessing community-based research?

In early 2007, I presented a paper at the University of Stellenbosch which argued for a paradigm shift in both supervision and evaluation methods and proposed revised criteria for assessing engaged community based practice⁴. Together with the Fine Art Department I developed a distinct model for supervising and assessing post graduate students involved in community- based research in the arts. The hope was that academics, who may be unfamiliar with action research methodologies, could still fairly assess community-based research projects against guidelines and in accordance with their public good values. The new criteria for examining students were recently accepted by the faculty research committee (FRC), and this action has opened up opportunities to expand the scholarship in the field and credit our students who are involved with engaged learning.

Phumani Paper, as a research and engagement programme that has led to the establishment of papermaking as a small cultural industry for South Africa, has demonstrated the value of engaged and collaborative research. The recent Ford Foundation-funded pilot programme implemented with the University of Michigan in 2006 has presented Participatory Action Research and the use of creative tools such as Photo Voice as a valid scholarly research practice that is suitable for arts

4 *Shifting the Paradigm: The need for assessment criteria for community engaged research in the visual arts*. Paper presented at the International Conference: University of Stellenbosch 23-26 April 2007 *Postgraduate Supervision and Training: The State of the Art and the Artist*.

practitioners in a South African context. The benefits and empowerment are equally experienced by the 'researcher' or facilitator and the community participants. Our aim should not be to try and make excellent practitioners into poor academics, but to find ways of building strength and capacity using local knowledge and diverse methodologies that are our own, and more suitable to our creative and practice-based disciplines. Research continues to be pursued in the elite world of higher education, while activism and community engagement happens in broad fronts on the ground. Until we bridge that gap, I believe, we have not truly transformed South African education.

In conclusion I would like to quote the conclusion of Prof. Ahmed Bawa's WISER⁵ address at Wits University:

"South African higher education began as and remains highly elitist. It seems critical therefore to consider the construction of higher education as the developer of a broad-based intellectual culture in the societies that they serve rather than of certain very small elites" (Bawa, 2006: 4)

I agree with Bawa that for transformation to occur in Higher education we must provide the space for a re-imagining of the South African university to reclaim itself as a truly integrated South African institution.

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5 WISER: Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of the Witwatersrand

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