

Advancing critical thinking about adult basic education through academic service learning

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Abstract

To educate university students to be critical engagers of ABET requires the reorganisation of the educational sites in ways that enable students to make rulings about how society is historically and socially constructed. Academic service-learning is a pedagogy that lends itself to such reorganisation and outcomes. In this article I report on research that I conducted on how an academic service learning module can advance critical citizenship in students. After the initial lecture sessions in the university classroom, the students are placed at an ABET center where they experience first hand the academic and social environment of the ABET learner. Data was collected through reflective journals and a focused reflective interview with the students after their service period was completed. Based on my analysis of their reflective journal entries and transcriptions, the findings show that the B Ed Honours students grew personally and professionally. The narratives that they produced were emancipatory in that students started questioning their own biases about non-literate learners as knowledge makers as well as the roles that politics and power play in shaping educational experiences. Furthermore, the students became more reflective about their own roles as educators and the consequence of their actions on their own students in schools.

Introduction

Global criticism of higher education not developing civic competencies in students and universities having lost their civic purpose (Checkoway, 2001), has fuelled the debate on university ineffectiveness in addressing societal problems and pressing community needs. In South Africa many universities have expanded their role and redefined the university as a critical role-player in the life-long learning of its student clientele. This is in response to a government mandate and a Department of Education request to South African universities to start serving the new social order (White Paper, 1997) by becoming proactive partners for development. However, it is also the result of a selected few academics' changed thinking about what scholarship is. In the USA Bringle and Hatcher's (2000) research highlighted the integration of service into curriculum at American institutions as the most significant manifestation of higher education's commitment to change. In South Africa service meeting academic work is still being cautiously pursued.

The success of education and civil society lies in preparing the Higher Education student to function in an ever-changing world. As educators we can do that by creating opportunities for students to put coursework theories into practice in their own world situations. Cone (2001) uses the blue-collar metaphor of the toolbox to explain why students have to use the intellectual tools they gained from their coursework, to engage in service in the community. He equates intellectual tools

with carpentry tools and explains how talking about the functions of carpentry tools will not develop the apprentice into an accomplished carpenter. Similarly students need to practice their intellectual tools in real world settings to find out whether what they know is relevant, sufficient and effective, especially in communities where service is sorely needed. My view is that our educator's role in higher education should be to guide students in learning how to use the tools of service effectively and efficiently. Hopefully then students will come to integrate that working knowledge into their own way of looking at and understanding the world. Being equipped with professional skills is not good enough to be successful in life because the skills of a critical citizen in an ever-changing world are as necessary as theorising about it.

In 2004 I took over the teaching responsibilities for the Adult Basic Education and training (ABET from here onwards) module in the B.Ed Honors programme at University of Stellenbosch. The students in this programme are all qualified teachers and predominantly white and female. Since teaching this adult basic education module, I have been struck by how difficult it is to engage these literate students in discussion on non-formal education, specifically its role in addressing illiteracy amongst adults. As teachers, these students appear unconcerned that 1.5 million adult South Africans have had no education at all, and that nearly 5 million adults aged 15 and older have had no schooling above Grade 6 (<http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/UNESCO-UIE/literacyexchange/southafrica>). Adult basic education is too far removed from their worlds and work contexts, and so also are the population that ABET serves. The higher education students have difficulty understanding ABET relating it to the challenges that a non-literate adult experiences in a literate world. A possible reason could be that the traditional University of Stellenbosch student is from a white, privileged educational background. Such students' continuing isolation from and lack of exposure to non-literate South Africans of other socio-economic classes contributes to their lack of understanding of the educational challenges that non-literate South Africans face to access education.

The goal that I set for students as citizens of South Africa is that they develop into active and well-informed citizens of their broader educational society. A weakness that I identified in the existing programme was the lack of opportunities for these education students to develop a critical understanding of the contexts within which education in South Africa plays out, and how segregation policies fractured South African educational experiences. This spearheaded my decision to redesign the B Ed Honors Specialized Education module and to convert it into an academic service learning module. A service learning module typically embraces any vigilantly monitored service experience in which students have deliberate learning goals and reflect actively on what they learn throughout the experience. One of the aims of the module was to advance a proactive learning environment that encourages collaborative engagement between ABET centers and the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University. What was required was that these students collaborate with non-formal education, which traditionally is not a partner of higher education. Though the university's students do occasionally work in the Kayamandi, Idasvalley and Cloeteville¹ communities, their service relationship is non-academic, with the focus on the students' benefactor role in rendering philanthropic services to these communities.

¹ These are three black communities that surround the campus of the university.

The justification to implement an academic service learning module was to affirm the legitimacy of the university as educational powerhouse and citizen developer. This change process was also driven by the challenge posed by South African society for higher education to produce professionals who are adaptable possessors of sophisticated knowledge, lifelong-learners and problem solvers (Eyler, 2001; Davis & Meyer, 1998; Vaill, 1997). Finally it was driven by a need for educated South Africans to become active citizens who are committed to the development of South Africa.

I approached the context as well as the construction of knowledge about adult education and meaning making as a negotiated process. Our official community partner is Matie Community Service (MCS), an organisation that offers literacy and numeracy classes to adult learners in Stellenbosch and surrounding towns. In 2004 I approached the coordinator of the ABET programme with the intention of starting a mutually beneficial relationship with MCS. The adult education facilitators were in need of educational assistance in their classes and I as a lecturer needed a non-formal educational setting where my students could learn first hand about ABET. Since 2005 my students have spent half of their module time with MCS adult basic education facilitators in their classes. In exceptional cases and with prior approval, some students are placed at alternative ABET centers. The 20+ students that yearly enroll for this module are assigned placement in an ABET classroom after having completed the foundational part of the module. During this second phase of the module they acquire first hand knowledge of ABET from the adult basic education learners that they are teamed up with. In addition, they assist the ABET facilitators with education related tasks.

Why academic service learning?

In the university environment, I am continuously confronted by educational spaces that emulate a modernistic logic about critical thinking. Within such a paradigm there is the tendency to over rationalise thinking, to then trim it down to a set of micrological skills that promote critical thinking as a form of procedural knowledge. What is promoted as higher order thinking skills include a student's ability to identify common properties of adult learning, such as labeling, categorizing, relating, inferring and justifying. As stated by Kincheloe (1993) in his research on teacher thinking, this reductionism of knowledge removes the political and ethical dimensions of thinking. He says that critical thinking has to move the learner/thinker in an "emancipatory direction with an omnipresent sense of self-awareness" (Kincheloe, 1993:26). This implies a concern with the development of a liberated mind, a critical consciousness, and a free society. This ties in with Giroux's (2007; also Giroux & Searls, 2006) thinking when he proposes that schooling for citizenship requires that educational sites be organised in ways that enable students to make rulings about how society is historically and socially constructed. For him, pedagogy is a political, moral, and critical practice that assumes a more just and democratic view of the world.

In general, higher education students are lacking in knowledge and understanding of the conditions in which non-formal education functions, which leads to a very limited understanding of ABET. Though they engage with the theories on adult learning and are able to critique the various learning styles and programmes, they are unable to argue convincingly about the justifications for why some programmes are needed and others rejected in ABET centers around South Africa. I argue that interacting with ABET sites could enhance a student's understanding of how ABET functions, and how existing social relations are organised around various types of oppression such as illiteracy,

classism, racism and sexism in education systems. Thus, should community interaction form part of the student's formal course work, it could circumvent situations in which the student uncritically performs an altruistic deed. Instead, it could create an opportunity to advance educational praxis. Praxis I use here in a Marxist sense (Freire, 1992), meaning the process through which a learner constantly engages in critical reflection on her actions with the purpose of improving on such actions. As a philosophy, academic service-learning reflects the belief that education should develop the students' social responsibility and prepare them to become involved citizens in democratic life. As pedagogy, service-learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while students learn through active engagement. This is a pedagogy that does not confine itself to the advancement of critical thinking only; it also encourages critical participation and action. The learner accomplishes tasks that meet human needs in combination with his/her conscious educational growth. Thus, an exploration of processes to bring service (ABET student support) and learning (non-formal education) together to provide critical experiential learning opportunities for students, seemed to be a pedagogically sound move to make.

Service-learning as educational model has its roots in social reconstructivism, which encourages the student to analyse issues and to engage in efforts to solve them. This pedagogy draws on Paulo Freire's critical theory, as service-learning is about social justice and change, and the conscientisation of the learner (Freire, 1992; 1994; Kanpol, 1994) about the world. As the coordinator of the module, I structure the students' introduction to the service environment as well as guide them so that they learn to experience and understand the world of the basic education learner at a deeper and more critical level. Their interactions are facilitated by an assignment that contains a sequence of reflective guiding activities during the service-learning period (Eyler, 2001). Dialectics is encouraged in the form of reflective journal entries that the students write as well as the oral reflective discussion that they participate in, in the final class session.

Each student agrees to keep a journal for the 5 week service period. I consider journaling to be a valuable tool as it provides insight into the students' self-awareness. Their assignments required them to build relationships with the adult learners in the class and gain insight into the learners' challenges with learning. Additional requirements were to observe and reflect on the decisions that facilitators make about pedagogy, and to critique how facilitators accommodate the various learning styles of adult learners. Their reflective journals had to provide insights into what they experienced and what their thoughts were on what they were learning. It also had to indicate whether the service experience led to a critical learning experience and whether their thinking about ABET shifted in the time. I anticipated that their reflections would expose contradictions, misconceptions, and conflict that they might experience during this time.

The five weeks on site were followed by an active reflection session in which the whole B Ed Honors class could collaboratively reflect on their ABET experiences. Critical reflection is considered to be the highest form of reflection because it does not just stimulate personal understanding but also has the potential to instigate social change. Rather political in nature, it allows participants to question current rules and procedures and challenge the status quo. In the next section I will discuss the themes that came out of the data collected through the reflective journal entries and the transcription of the reflective session.

The adult learner as a person BEYOND the statistic

In the Faculty of Education the adult basic education module is the only module on non-formal education. When B Ed Honors students start this module in January, I test their knowledge about the South African adult learner. My experience is that they tend to lump all adult learners together as a homogeneous group. What I always find interesting in their categorization, is that higher education students do not include themselves as belonging to the population of adult learners. They usually see the adult learner as synonymous with the non-literate adult. These second or third generation university students typically profess to not knowing any non-literate people prior to starting this module. It thus is not surprising that some believe that non-literate adults can only start functioning effectively once they become literate. As qualified teachers, they assume that their task at MCS will be to 'help' the adult learners, as well as 'guide' the ABET facilitators in their classes. Some students even hold assumptions that non-literate adults have a specific profile: black poor, needy, unkept. One student's earliest journal entry about one of the ABET adults states:

I was surprised at how neat he looked in his buttoned shirt and golf cap. Never in 100 years would I have guessed that he never went to school. (JE8)

In these earlier entries it would appear almost as if the B Ed Honors students naively objectify the ABET adults as oddities different to them. The twenty-something old students describe these mature adult learners, some as old as seventy, as "cute", or refer to them in the diminutive form as "die mensies" ("the little people") or "die vroujie" (the little woman). However, their later entries show a change in their address mode for the same ABET learners, when they either use their names or refer to them as Mr. or Ms, or even aunt or uncle. I refer to this as a relational discourse, one that changes once the students establish contact and start building relationships with the adult learners.

The one dimensional adult learner in the text comes to life in many different forms and ages in the heterogeneous ABET classes. The B Ed Honors students meet adult learners who range in age from 16 year olds to 80 year olds. They also meet ABET learners who are young, white and are mentally challenged. In their second week entries, when they describe the adult learners, they make a distinction between the older and younger adults. Within the regular ABET class there tends to also be a small percentage of learners who are young people who have dropped out of formal school. These learners are described as uncomfortable to deal with and uncooperative in class despite their being better able to cope with academic work because of skills previously acquired in formal school. They wanted to know why young people, who have started in formal school, "choose" to access ABET, and why they were in these classes.

They report that the older learners (40+) in their classes mostly are black (African and Coloured), have never been to school or have had minimal exposure to formal schooling. These adults generally grew up in rural areas or on farms. Their exposure to ABET classes that contain so many aged learners, some older than 60 years, have challenged my students' privileged educational comfort zones, and their thinking about why these adults are only now accessing education. Though students feel awkward and are sometimes on the defensive when discussing Apartheid's role in the high illiteracy rate of many black South Africans, their journals contain many references to its impact on access for the older learners. I attribute this to the fact that a journal is a less threatening

space for a student to test her/his reflections about the ABET learner. In the initial class discussions I have observed that students engaged in very limited ways with the political history of education. In the ABET class they are required to find out what the dispositional, situational and institutional constraints were that made these adults enter education this late in life. For most students it is the first time that they talk to non-literate people about access to education. The students are encouraged to refer to the readings or to read up on issues that they are puzzled by in the ABET class. By being confronted with the results of the unequal educational policies of the past in the ABET class the students are more able to challenge their own knowledge and meaning making.

I chatted to two learners about their past and experiences with ABET. It was very humbling as both had to leave school to go and work. It really made me think about my privileged life. It was especially weird when I went from the centre to teach at my rich, girls-only school after class. (JE2)

Joey likes talking. He left school aged 12 when his father was killed. To be able to stay on the farm, he started working in place of his father. I think he would have achieved and reached higher heights if given the chance. (JE5)

The B Ed honors students were in the privileged position to learn first hand the reasons why these adults did not attend school. Most of their stories spoke about farm worker children whose families were forced to put their children to work at an early age due to poverty, lack of schools and the farmers' rules which required that families vacate their housing unless they worked for the farmer.

Shadowing the adult learners in their educational struggles

MCS has many ABET settings, two being on farms. The B Ed Honors students whose placement was in the night classes drove in the van that picked up the ABET learners from neighbouring farms. These trips gave the students some insight into the challenges that especially farm workers and other blue-collar workers face in attending ABET classes. During the five weeks, they would arrive at some of the farm worker homes, and the adult learners would still be working on the land or in the vineyards as their work day was not always guided by a formalised time table. During harvest times, some ABET learners would come straight from work still wearing their work overalls, as one journal entry reads:

S is a farm worker and had just finished working in the cellar, still wearing her overall. She was uncomfortable and asked "om verskoning" [apologised] because she is a bit smelly after the day's work.

MCS has collaborated with many farmers to encourage their workers to enroll for ABET classes. Some farmers pay their workers' tuition fees, others do not. Farm workers on average earned R276 per week for a 7h30 – 17h30 workday. Even though the fees to attend classes are minimal, it is still too much for those who have to pay their own fees. By witnessing some ABET learners' circumstances, and by talking to them, they learnt that though an employer might pay a worker's fees, the adult learner was still responsible for his/her own transport to class. None of the ABET learners at MCS could afford their own transport and were dependent on others for transportation to the ABET setting. Those not fortunate enough to be picked up by the MCS van had to travel by train at night to attend the classes. The costs, both financial as well as personal, of attending ABET

classes was made visible to the students by both the adult learners as well as facilitators of the programme. Students gained tangible knowledge and insight about the ABET learners' personal circumstances in a way that books or lectures could not have provided.

In working with the ABET adults the students were often confronted with how a lack of cultural capital such as growing up without books in the home, and having non-literate parents, impacted on the preparedness of these adults to participate in class activities. One of the students expressed amazement that the adults she worked with did not know any of the fables and fairy tales with which, she assumed, all children in South Africa grow up. Her assumption about this cultural universality was shaken.

Most of the adult learners had never heard of Hansel and Gretel, - the facilitator first had to tell them the story! This showed me how different their lives were from ours, because in our culture we grew up with the fables Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding hood.

Education has different textures

All of the students who enroll for the module are qualified teachers who work either in primary or secondary education contexts with children. In our class discussions, it was very clear that their frame of reference is children, and their context formal education. As such, their understanding of what their roles as educators are, is tied up in their experiences as teachers of children. In the ABET context, it is a shock to them when they see "scruffy", "poorly resourced" rooms that masquerade as classrooms for the ABET learners. Some ABET classes are held at MCS's premises, but others are held in small rooms or halls elsewhere. The students are also unprepared for the "chaos" when ABET classes sometimes are cancelled due to a low learner turnout rate, or during harvest time when workers work longer hours. Pressing life-world tasks such as a sick child, transport problems or different seasonal work timetables and other responsibilities impose much more harshly on the non-formal education classroom than on the formal school.

These students, as formal school educators, held assumptions that the government finances all school education equally. These assumptions are challenged by the circumstances of both the ABET centres and those that it serves. Because the B Ed Honors students are required to learn about how adult basic education learning centers are financed and managed, they know a lot about the politics surrounding the financing of ABET education. Being able to talk to the facilitators and the learners placed them in the informed position to critique the government documentation effectively, as well as to question the commitment to equal education for all. But they also gained a great deal from being able to shadow the ABET facilitator. The uniqueness of each ABET center and the learners they serve contributed to their understanding of the complexity and the vast problems faced by South African education. It made them curious and challenged them to become more informed.

Adult learners bring a richness to the educational environment that is lacking in the high school

What most of my students wrote about towards the end of their reflections is how different the adult learner is to the child or the youth-as-learner and how much knowledge these adults have

to contribute to a learning environment. They are almost amazed at their thoughts. "There is a lot of hidden knowledge that I would have obtained had I stayed longer." (JE1)

Something that stood out for me was their wealth of knowledge, and their enthusiasm when we engage in discussions. They just do so much better orally than when they have to write or read. (JE5).

It was incredible to see how the adult learners struggle to learn, it is from here where I could apply the theories learnt in class. (JE1)

The biggest difference that the students pointed out was how motivated adult learners are and the efforts they make to get to class. The students also commented on how appreciative the learners were of the opportunity to participate in education. The following excerpts demonstrate that:

The adult learners know what they want and that motivates them. These adults are driven to become literate. (JE1)

They grab at every little bit of knowledge with a passion. (JE 8)

It was very wet today. I take my hat off to J and K who came to class today. If I were in their shoes, I would have gone home (from work) and laid in front of the TV instead of getting wet and cold. What unbelievable staying power they have... motivation and willingness they have. (JE7)

Another student in her journal entry writes how much more reflective the adult learners are when compared to children. "What I observed today is that there is a great deal of reflection which Mezirow (2000) talks about going on in the classroom." She links her entry to the "disconcerting event" of transformational theory. She had observed how this experience opened up discussion on race and class issues, as well as oppression. She continues to tell how two women learners started crying when they spoke about an excursion's impact on them. Relating the excursion to the present, one of the ABET learners commented that that slavery continues to exist in society, at work and at home. Another adult learner in the same group wrote a whole reflection piece for Mister X (the facilitator of the class). In it she said that by taking them on this excursion, Mister X made her look up for the first time. She had never seen the beauty in the city before, because she had always been in a hurry.

The ABET class as liberatory space

A lot has been written about the empowering effect and value of the ABET class for the adult learners (Stromquist, 1990; 1994; Daniels, 1997; 1998). The students' journal entries contained many personalised examples thereof. The following are the journal reflections of one (white) student during an outing where the (black) adult learners were driven through District Six, an area that some were forcibly removed from in the past. They were on their way to visit a slave lodge, built in 1679 in Cape Town, and which was once the largest lodge in the land.

Driving through District Six is an eerie experience; you can almost hear the voices of the people who were forcibly removed. Some of the class' learners were born there and remember the graders demolishing their homes. (They talk about D6 as we drive through).

And at the lodge:

I found it amazing, yet indescribable that some of the learners' ancestors were slaves. I wonder if any of my ancestors were their masters. These thoughts evoke feelings of guilt and sadness.

Her entry after they visited the Castle of Good Hope, referring to the castle which was built by personnel of the Dutch East India Company:

This is where my mother's ancestors arrived...with Jan van Riebeeck. What am I if not South African? Some of the learners (referring to the Colored ABET learners in the group) also have Dutch ancestry. Funny how one is called coloured even when one may be more white than black.

Another student similarly reflected on her privileged life as an educated, middle class white South African. This young woman in the following insert is referring to the 60-year old ABET student she worked with.

Today it rained and I wanted to stay at home. However, driving in the rain to the ABET centre the thought also crossed my mind how privileged I am to be in my warm car, and dry. When I stopped, I saw J, waiting in the rain shielding himself against the rain with his backpack. I was so glad to see him, and him me...it feels like friendship.

Academic Service learning for educational growth

In completing their module responsibilities by addressing the ABET learners' academic needs through personal assistance, the B Ed Honors students also reflected on their educational growth. The students' growth during these sessions was evident in their journal entries. They also grew in their appreciation for the academic service learning experience:

In the university classroom it seemed as if it was some abstract ideas, just written down by scholars. In the ABET classroom it was more practical and easier to absorb the theories and situations of the adult learner than in the other class. (JE1)

In the reflective session during which the whole class meets after the service period has been completed, I tested the group's thinking about ABET and the adult learner, and was encouraged by their eagerness to voice their opinions and share their experiences. I include the following excerpt as an example of a more critical stance on non-formal education.

Jane: I was surprised by my realisation whilst doing my service at L that there are people close to me and you who simply cannot read or write. It sounds so stupid, ...I mean, their children can read and write, their grandchildren. There was this woman that I worked with who basically is learning alongside her 4-year old grandchild. It is amazing to think that one is daily in interaction with such people. They are so close to you, but they never had the opportunities.

Tia: Yes, strange, isn't it? One almost takes for granted that everyone can write and read. I felt that it is wonderful what they are doing and that they come (to the ABET centre) because everyone's story is something different or situations made that they are not literate. I just did not realise the magnitude of the illiteracy .

Sonia: I started looking at it (non-literacy) through a different lens. It is sad when one looks at the history of our land, and the impact of its laws. That so many people are still illiterate and here we are at this beautiful university with its many under utilised resources... to help those people. I think we can do a lot to help those adults.

These were comments coming from three young female students who, a few months earlier, stated that their passion lies with children, and that they were only doing the module because it is a compulsory module for their programme. When I asked Sonia to clarify who she meant, should help, she said that she referred to both university and its student population. "Here are many facilities that are under-utilised. Why can it not be used? I know money is always a problem, but if we want to build a better nation..."

Given the slant of the conversation, I asked the class to respond to my statement that education is political, and that they could be agents for change. Though more open, their conversations still reflected a reservation about seeing themselves as agents for education for all. The following two students' responses support this conclusion:

I have never seen myself as a change agent. I focused on the learners and their experience of the process. I did not think that I did good or did something wonderful. If I wanted to think politics then I guess that there was a bit of feeling guilty that I indirectly formed part of a system that caused people to be where they are now. Maybe it is that you just never had the insight or the knowledge or maybe you just never thought any further. I just felt that one had to be there to help to just provide opportunities to the people similar to yours.

This is the point where this module connects with those that deal with transformation and those other things in the other modules. The whole module has made you (me) aware of things that happen out there. I hope that this was also the experience for my classmates, as you now see the real thing, the things that really happened. These are people, people who have the same right as I have to be in this country, who have been here as long as I have, but who have been lost.

Lessons learnt about the challenges of managing service-learning

When I changed the format of the module in 2005 there were many teething problems. Without any assistance or prior experience to draw from, it was quite difficult in the first two years to manage all processes smoothly. A service-learning module requires a lot of planning by the lecturer. There were the typical logistical problems of locating suitable ABET sites and matching the module time to the ABET classes. As the B Ed Honours classes are only offered between 16h00 – 21h30 on week nights, only sessions that did not disrupt the Honours time table could be considered. However, it was not only the time table that presented problems. Formally schooled adults naively expect that ABET would be a continuation of their own school programmes. It is a culture shock to some, and they find themselves not able to function in what they experience as chaotic circumstances that some "set out to fix". In their reflections some referred to the ABET classes as disorganised, and even sought to reprimand facilitators on their lenient attitude toward disciplining their learners.

In the first year of implementation I found out after the module had ended that some students interpreted the ABET class as leisure time. One student took her knitting to class and in the 2-

hour session would engage in this activity. Her reflective journal on the other hand contained very positive and glowing learning experiences of the ABET class. I took her journal entries to be the truth, never considering that she was fabricating her experiences. Only after the module had ended and I had had a session with the facilitators did I find out what really happened. What I learnt from this experience was that I had prepare students more thoroughly for the ABET class, and that their programme had to have more structure. As such, I now include topics such as accessing marginalised educational communities, and classroom ethics as part of their preparation. The students also have to commit in writing to the process as an academic exchange. Another change that was instituted was that all students had to sign a contract with one facilitator and his/her class to be assigned to that class for the duration of the service period. One of their assignments requires that they shadow the facilitator; another that they work and get to know one learner but also that they write about the learner profile of the class. These are some of the activities that keep them task-focused and require them to get to know the class at a much more intimate level than before.

This past year I have found that new students enter the module with prior knowledge of what to expect. I have learnt to not underestimate the local student grapevine, because students talk to one another. Some students who have taken the module before, and who have had a positive service-learning experience have been encouraging others to take the class. Though this module is optional for some honours programmes, I have had a few students who enrol because former students have recommended it to them.

Service-learning, Professional Development and Emancipation

In this article I shared the findings of research on how students' thinking about adult basic education can be challenged through academic service learning in which they are required to experience ABET hands-on. Most of these students had never given serious thought to adult basic education prior to enrolling for the B Ed Honours programme in which the ABET module is a compulsory module. In formal education the focus is on children only, not adults, and this module served to expose them to adults as learners, and the context of non-formal education, for the first time. Though I do not believe that this experience will lead to a massive exodus from formal education, and a move to non-formal education by these students, they leave the module much richer in knowledge. Their reflections make me believe that these students' apolitical views on ABET have been replaced with opinionated perspectives about education and a more comprehensive understanding of who the South African learner population is. The following excerpt summarises student views on the pedagogy:

This was an interesting combination...this adult learning. It is not just about adults learning to read and write, it is also about how you deal with people and the classroom dynamics – and this I found very interesting and very helpful to me as an educator.

The personal reflections as recorded in the journals and shared in the reflective class discussion was a process that encouraged students to examine the motives related to their worldview, ethical behaviours, and basic beliefs about who they are as educators in South Africa. Based on an analysis of their journal entries, together with their reflections and discussion during the reflective session, the B Ed Honours students' meaning making of the ABET classroom led to personal as well as professional development for most. The service experience was a process that produced narratives that were emancipatory in that students started questioning their own limited knowledge about

non-literate learners as well as the roles that politics and power play in shaping educational experiences. A significant few remarked on their privileged positioning as white South Africans who before had not thought about the impact that discriminatory educational access and resources could have on a country's literacy rates and the employability of such adults.

Though they were students, their discourse showed that they had become much more reflexive and self-conscious about their roles as educators and the consequences that their actions have on their own students (learners). Exposure to the ABET learners expanded these formal school educators' limited understanding of the challenges that non-literate parents face in academically supporting their school-going children. The magnitude of such challenges were brought to the fore when they worked with the ABET adults and saw how non-literacy could constraint parental support to school-going children. Comments such as that they only now realise that these non-literate adults could be the parents of many of their formal school learners are evidence of how valuable this knowledge could become in future planning by these teachers. As stated by one of the students: "to gain an understanding of the ABET learner is to capacitate yourself as educator to better meet the challenges in your own classroom." In the ABET class the facilitators used alternative methodologies and approaches to learning that the students felt could be tried out in formal education too. These students remarked that they would be implementing some of the ABET methods and experiences in their own classes. This new knowledge of an expanded education system places these student in a better position to make a contribution to education in South Africa.

By adopting academic service learning as pedagogy for this module, I facilitated a process through which the students' critical consciousness about ABET was raised. The typical misconception that higher education students have of ABET problems is that the university knows what is best for ABET and that an application of theory will solve the problem. By having community interaction as part of their formal course work, the student had to engage with the setting as an educational, not a philanthropic site. This was not easy for these higher education students who were better educated than the ABET facilitators and who assumed that their tasks would be to help non-literates to read and write, and to advise their facilitators. My students soon found out that service learning is relationship-based and only succeeds when each relationship is allowed to develop in a unique pattern. The non-formal education classroom challenged their own social reality constantly, as their formal training as school teachers were not sufficient to equip them to deal with the educational challenges that ABET learners face. Over the weeks of working closely with these facilitators and adult learners their frame of reference for education expanded. They started engaging with non-formal education at a much more critical level. They also gained insights into the worlds of adults who had been denied access to education in the past and whose current educational paths still held many obstacles, difficulties and challenges in ways that the formal classroom does not for a child. As students they started relating to these adults as peers, and began approaching the discussions on ABET in a much more personal and critical way. Many of my students learnt valuable lessons from their "illiterate" peers.

Finally, interacting with ABET sites enhanced these students' understanding of how ABET functions in South Africa. This was evident in the many questions and comments about South Africa's commitment to honouring the World Declaration on Education for All, taken in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, about access, and civil society's responsibility to facilitate that access. I felt that I had succeeded in my role as facilitator of the growth of their consciousness when they started engaging

with the academic discourse on adult basic education. And I saw them making the switch from being passive students to becoming active subjects of their own knowledge construction.

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