

From notions of charity to social justice in service-learning: The complex experience of communities

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Abstract

Due to increasing popularity and widespread adoption service-learning is in danger of becoming a technical practice with a 'charity' oriented form of engagement with communities. The purpose of the current study was to explore a more 'justice' oriented approach to researching the effect of service-learning on the communities that serve as sites for this form of curriculum. This was attempted through, firstly, developing an understanding of how two communities (learners and schools) experienced a service learning programme run as a psychology module at the University of KwaZulu Natal, and secondly, exploring what the use of participatory techniques might be in service-learning research. The results revealed that participatory approaches to research with communities may be more suited to the complex context of service-learning than traditional non-participatory approaches. The effect of service-learning on the communities involved in the research revealed that practitioners need to move beyond notions of 'benefit' to explore the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of the engagement between higher education institutions and communities that are the object of service.

Keywords: service-learning, community's voice, participatory approach, ambivalent nature of partnerships

Introduction

The service-learning movement has often downplayed or glossed over the minimal social justice outcomes of service-learning practices. For all of the human, fiscal, and institutional resources devoted to service-learning across higher education, there are, in fact, very minimal on-the-ground changes in the academy, in local communities, or in society more generally. (Butin, 2006, p.491)

Service-learning has its origins in "Dewey's philosophy of education for democracy" (Hatcher, 1997) and Boyer's "scholarship of engagement" (Boyer,1990, cited in O'Brien, 2005, p.67). It has become popular because it is a pedagogy that engages both students and faculty in their communities in ways that are intended to be educationally meaningful to all those involved (Bringle & Duffy, 1998). There is a multitude of approaches and definitions in service-learning but "there is general agreement that service-learning pedagogy explicitly links community service to the curriculum; meets a genuine community need; (and) is collaboratively designed with the service provider and the recipient" (Hart, 2006, p.20). Furco (1996) states that service-learning is unique in its "intention

to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both service being provided and learning that is occurring” (p.5).

The purpose of service-learning: charity or social justice?

Despite its intention for mutual benefit, service-learning often remains a university focused activity. It appears to fill university needs for meaningful student learning, preparation of students for the ‘real world’, and to demonstrate the social relevance of the university in the community. According to John (2006:51) “universities all over the world pledge to be socially relevant and responsive to the needs of their broader communities”. Service-learning is another mechanism through which this relevance can be demonstrated.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, it is viewed as an *active* pedagogy, which embodies the ‘scholarship of engagement’ and in so doing develops active, democratic citizens. The value of service-learning lies in its location in the real ‘messy’ world where those involved “proceed(s) from doubt to the resolution of doubt, to the generation of new doubt. For Dewey, doubt lies not in the mind but in the situation” (Schön, 1995). Within this complex, ambiguous, real world context discomfort and disequilibrium are meant to evoke questions about social realities and one’s role in them. Unfortunately the wide-spread adoption of service-learning has resulted in a dilution of these original intentions within higher education settings where “the top-down nature of (such) knowledge production and dissemination supports a perspective of service-learning first and foremost as a ‘technical’ practice of (simply) an effective pedagogical practice without the attendant complexity or controversy” (Butin, 2007, p. 2). For many service-learning remains at the level of an ‘effective pedagogy’, the by-product of which is a charitable outcome for the communities involved.

Morton (1997) has highlighted that universities need to move from relating to communities in the form of charity to focussing on issues of justice, so that mutually beneficial and equal partnerships can be developed. John Dewey observed that charity too often results in one class “achieving merit by doing things gratuitously for an inferior class” (cited in Morton, 1997, p.8). Charity “too readily becomes an excuse for maintaining laws and social arrangements which ought themselves to be changed in the interests of fair play” (Morton, 1997, p.8). Charity also emphasises the ‘service-provider’ and undervalues the ‘recipient’ resulting in power imbalances that leave the community with feelings of resentment towards the university because they feel like a laboratory in which the university ‘experiments’ (Rosner-Salazar, 2003) or demonstrates its ‘social relevance’. Charity-focussed engagement thus serves to dilute the service-learning experience, making “initially difficult practices amenable to all with the consequence of undercutting and avoiding the very difficulty originally meant to be engaged” (Butin, 2007, p. 2). Transformatory engagement, however, recognises the complex, ambiguous nature of the context and uses the doubt generated to expose the forces in society which maintain fundamental inequalities (cf Community Development Resource Association, C.D.R.A 1996/7).

Viewing communities from the perspective of justice rather than charity promotes examination of the power relationships that exist in the community-university partnership. It allows communities to be understood through the identification of their strengths, assets and wisdom versus merely understanding the community through the perspective of deficits and needs (Rosner-Salazar, 2003). Justice promotes a sense of mutuality in a community-university partnership. This means that the community and the institution can try to develop a ‘shared reality’ through mutual communication,

recognition, access to resources, access to opportunities; whilst recognising separateness in terms of each partner's sense of autonomy, the recognition of boundaries and freedom to choose whether or not to participate in the partnership (Mitchell & Rautenbach, 2005).

The context of service-learning: University-Community Partnerships

Effective university-community collaborations should occur in service-learning programmes to avoid power imbalances and ensure that both the community and university interact in the relationship in an equitable manner. In considering the partnership that exists between the community and the university in service-learning; the community provides resources, in the form of educating the students about the strengths and pressures that the community experiences, which, if absent, would make service-learning impossible; while, ideally, the students bring academic knowledge and training to bear on issues faced by the community. Most often though, students are extra 'hands and feet' for communities. Therefore, community partners are collaborators, rather than 'volunteer sites' in a relationship that is meant to be mutually beneficial (Rosner-Salazar, 2003).

To date the shared power in partnerships remains an ideal. Osman & Castle (2006) warn that "service learning and its associated promise of reciprocity and mutual benefit run the risk of becoming rhetorical promises at the level of national policy and institutional practice" (p.69). We would argue that one of the reasons for the inequitable relationship between university and community in service-learning is the lack of community voice in service-learning research.

Research into the effects of Service-Learning on the Community

The impact that service-learning has on the community has been practically absent from the service-learning research agenda (Schmidt & Robby, 2002 citing Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2002). Eyler, Giles, and Grey (1999) report on dozens of research studies about how service-learning had affected college students while only reporting on six studies on how service-learning had affected the community and their satisfaction with the services provided (Schmidt & Robby, 2002). Giles & Eyler (1998) also comment that the question of what the value is of service-learning for the community is one of the top ten unanswered research questions in service-learning research today; and Cruz and Giles (2000) urge the research community to "overcome the obstacles of definition, methodology, and complexity in studying service-learning's effects on the community" (p.27).

Approaches to research in this area have tended to mirror the 'technical' approaches to service-learning that are the result of charity-focused engagement. The few researchers who have attempted to access community perspectives have tended to employ positivistic methods to obtain this feedback. In our view, questionnaires and rating scales tend not to capture the complexities of the service-learning process and serve to further dilute, undercut and avoid the difficulties that need to be engaged.

Schmidt & Robby (2002) asked "what's the value of Service-Learning to the community?". Their research involved evaluating service learning provided by students to 260 elementary school learners in a tutoring programme. The methods used to assess the programme were a) a five-item questionnaire administered after the academic period for the learners, and b) a five-point Likert scale for the teachers. Although this study is highlighted because of its attempt to provide a

community perspective on service-learning, it is limited because it is questionable whether a five item questionnaire/Likert scale is able to effectively capture the complex and diverse nature of the impact that service-learning has on the community. The research also neglected to identify where service-learning may have been difficult or problematic for the community.

A review of the research in this area of service-learning (almost all in the US) reveals that articles concerning, or claiming to concern, community and service-provider perspectives tend to report more about the service provider's benefits than the feelings of the community. This current research inadequacy is summarised by Ethel Jorge (2003) who says that "to date, most attention has been directed to the impact of such [service-learning] programs on student learning; however, insufficient note has been made of the impact this collaboration has on the community partners" (p.30).

In their evaluation of service-learning programmes at five universities in South Africa, Mouton & Wildschut (2005) found little direct evidence of benefit to communities, stating in their report that "the evidence of actual benefit or impact is weak" (p. 144). In addition they note that the data from the institutions "refer(s) to a lack of community outcomes or difficulty with assessing these. Echoing some of the sceptical comments made by students about the real value or benefit of the SL course to the communities, academics also referred to a lack of benefit in some cases" (Mouton & Wildschut, 2005, p. 145).

Local knowledge and Participatory Research Techniques

Given the lack of evidence of community benefit from service-learning activities and given the difficulties with assessing community outcomes, participatory research techniques hold promise. "Research, in a participatory approach, is viewed as a mutual activity involving co-ownership and shared power of both the research process and the product" (Kelly & van der Riet, 2001, cited in von Maltzahn & van der Riet, 2006, p.113). Within the paradigm of participatory research, participatory techniques are tools to access local knowledge which can then be "made explicit and incorporated into the development process" (Van Vlaenderen, 2004, p. 138).

Participatory research techniques emerged out of developing countries (Bhana, 1999) as a result of the need for an alternative paradigm which was more person-centred, and which provided a contextual understanding of human behaviour (Van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2004). Participatory techniques are therefore potentially valuable as a qualitative methodology for research in service learning, through providing a means for the community voice to be heard, and through recognising the power dynamics that often exist between the community and the university (Theis & Grady, 1991; Van Vlaenderen, 2004). This approach to research with communities is also a better fit with justice-oriented forms of service-learning engagement as the techniques allow for the complexity of everyday experience to emerge, and do not aim for 'clean' or 'diluted' outcomes.

Methodology

The purpose of the current study was to explore a more justice-oriented approach to researching the effect of service-learning on communities. This was attempted through:

- Firstly, developing an understanding of how two communities (learners and schools) experienced a service learning programme run as a psychology module at the University of KwaZulu Natal.
- Secondly, exploring whether participatory techniques are useful in service-learning research.

The service-learning intervention was run in the year prior to the research. The researcher visited the schools six months after the service-learning was completed. The service-learning involved third year psychology students conducting life skills lessons at local schools once a week for a period of 10 – 13 weeks.

The sample for this research project was purposive and was a non-random sample (Henry, 1998). The participants consisted of two groups of learners and two teachers from two of the schools that participated in the service-learning programme. The learners came from two age ranges, one group came from a high school and were between the ages of 17 and 19, while the other group of children came from a primary school and were between the ages of 11 and 14.

The research study used participatory techniques such as those used in rapid rural appraisal (Theis & Grady, 1991) i.e. Pair wise Ranking, Direct Ranking, Venn Diagrams and History Timelines. For example learners were asked to draw up a timeline of their experience of life orientation lessons, before the students arrived; while they were there; and then after they had left. Not only was a tangible product produced in this process, but the interaction around the task was recorded and the discussion transcribed as part of the data. The participatory techniques were used in the focus groups with the learners while the school educators participated in semi-structured interviews.

The data in this study therefore consisted of the output from the participatory techniques used in the focus groups which revealed how the learners at the schools experienced the service-learning. In addition transcriptions of the discussions in the focus groups around these activities provided more in depth data. Lastly, transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews with the educators revealed more of the complexities of the community-university interaction.

Results and discussion

Effect of service learning on these communities:

The participatory techniques produced a wealth of data which revealed that for the community the service-learning experience is ambivalent and paradoxical. There were some clear benefits of service learning, including: a desire for further education, the opportunity to discuss issues, the bond some learners developed with the students, and the innovative and interactive teaching style of the students. These are illustrated briefly in the excerpts below:

A desire to further their studies:

Extract 1:

P: Well, I think 'cause they made a difference to us because they taught us some things that we didn't know. I think if we further our studies and we want to become, like, teachers, um, we'd like to do the same for other children...

Discussion of important issues:

Extract 2:

P2: I liked when we were talking about AIDS and drugs and (etc???) and (such things???)

P3: What I enjoyed most was debating, having debates about (sex and drugs). What would you do if a friend like, did something to you? Like what would you do, would you like do something back to them as revenge, or like, make it even?

Bond with the students:

Extract 3:

I... they like the way that they talked to us and the way they reacted to us (unclear) and the students were (written by learners and read by the researcher to the group)... you wrote this hey? So what do you mean by that...? What do you mean?

P: They, they, I mean like, we had a bond together... we, we, talked about stuff and we felt safe with them...

Innovative teaching methods:

Extract 4:

P4: We interacted more with our peers like with discussions and games and stuff, when your teacher does games (unclear) [laughter]

I: And did you guys enjoy that interaction? {P: Ja} Was that fun? Would you, I mean what do you guys normally do in counselling?

P4: Sit and... DRUGS ARE BAD!

P1: Aw, please, I'm so sick of that talk... [Laughter]

P3: We're just so, when they just talk to us... its better... you guys made it interesting and fun

There were however less beneficial aspects of the experience. Some learners reported conflict with the students:

Extract 5:

P2: (indignant/angry) Hawu, I did, I did, this other time I kept quiet because I was sad {P3: Ja and then you were rude}... I, I was sad because... {P3: (unclear) asked you what was wrong}... Uhuh... I didn't want to tell her... {P3: Why}... Uhuh, I don't wanna tell her... and then she shouted at me because I didn't wanna tell her [laughter]...

Extract 6:

P7: Well me and XXX felt that we were just expressing an opinion and we got in trouble for that...

P3: We were asked to stay behind; we were being too forward...

P7: Maybe we were being a little bit loud maybe [laughter]... I don't even remember what it was about, but we felt that it was unreasonable...

P3: We really got into a topic and we were strong about what we believed in it and we just carried... it wasn't like cultural or religious, it was XXX was involved in it somewhere and she didn't get in trouble, cause they liked her...

P3: And then the next lesson we didn't give our opinions, we just sat dead quiet because we didn't want to like...

As mentioned above, what was revealed in the data was the ambivalent nature of the community's experience of service learning, cost and benefit were embedded in the same aspect. For example, the fact that students are from outside the community means that they do not come into the community environment with preconceived ideas about how the learners would behave and as a result are less judgemental and students feel safe to open up as they have a sense of confidentiality; but because they are from outside, the learners reported diminished respect for them as compared to the educators.

Extract 7:

P4: Our highest topic[in the ranking exercise], was an advantage, like the more freedom of expression, like we can express our opinion and aren't (distracted) by what the teachers are thinking of us and what they're going to tell their friends...[laughter]

P7: They do...teachers talk...[laughter]

An educator commented:

'...even our young teachers can't get that kind of openness because they're a person that they have to respect as a teacher and um, so they don't get chance to say the things they need to do.'

The students' relative youthfulness was also both an asset and a liability: the learners reported that the students were easier to relate to; that it was easier to establish more equitable relationships and that they were likely to be affected by the same issues as the learners. On the other hand, as they were younger they commanded less respect, they were viewed as less knowledgeable and having less experience.

Extract 8:

P4: don't have experience with that, people could feel that because you are only still studying that {P8: You only learn so much from a book}... I mean, maybe you do, maybe you know more than the teachers do, but we don't know that...from our point of view, a teacher's been teaching...(unclear)

P3: And you can't say like, ten years ago when I was teaching, this one student...

P1: Like XXX said, you might have read it all in a book, but your experience like first hand is like less than the teacher's...

The paradoxical nature of the experience was also evident in the interview data. The educators that were interviewed felt that it is very important for the students to work in the community so that they gain an understanding of the community and how it operates; at the same time they indicated that the university did not prepare their students well enough before placing them in the community and therefore, the students did not have an understanding of the community environment. They felt that students may not understand the community environment and make assumptions about the community without finding out the nature of the issue and its causes. The contextual complexity also highlighted cultural differences between certain students and the learners which required students to develop the skill of respecting other's perspectives and an understanding of the way in which learners behave in their context. Thus, paradoxically, students need to have the experience in the community to gain insight into the 'difficulties that need to be engaged', to become more sensitive and reflective; yet, communities would also like students to be sensitised and aware and self-reflective while they are engaged in this complex real world environment.

Educators reported that it is essential to have joint participation and co-operation within the service-learning programme and that as the relationship between the community and the university has developed over time, and mutually important lessons about the programme have been learned, the programme has improved.

Usefulness of participatory techniques

As discussed in the preceding section, the richness and depth of data that was generated through the participatory techniques provides for a much more textured understanding of the impact of

service learning on a community. The techniques used in this study enabled participation from a population (children and youth) that is often excluded and whose voice is often ignored. They engaged well with the activities which appeared to be stimulating for them.

The output from the ranking exercises, the Venn diagrams and the time lines are illustrated in Figures 1 – 4 below.

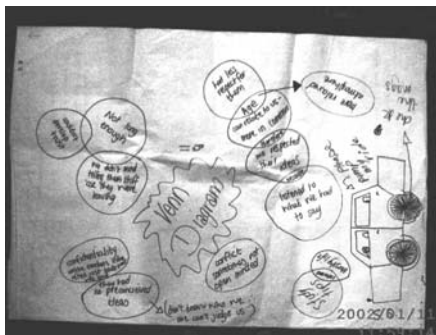


Figure 1: Venn diagram from the High School Learners (Age 17 – 19)

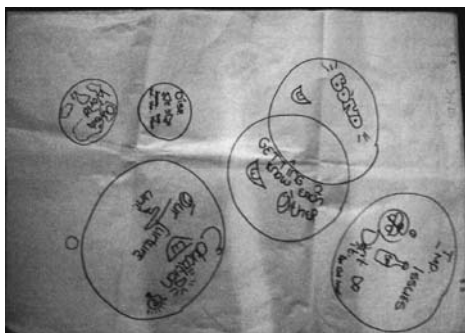


Figure 2: Venn diagram from the Primary School Learners (Age 11 – 14)



Figure 3: History Time-line from the High School learners



Figure 4: History Time-line from the Primary school learners

Conclusion

Previous research into the impact of service-learning on communities made use of positivistic approaches like questionnaires and survey research. These approaches stem from ‘thin’ conceptualisations of service-learning that tend to be technical and charity-focused, and aim to describe experiences in dualistic ways. We argue that the relationship between university and community is much more messy and complex than a Likert scale would be able to capture. The community experience of service-learning is complex, ambivalent and often paradoxical in nature, with cost and benefit often embedded in the same experience. As more ‘technical’ research methods are not adequate to capture this experience, participatory research techniques may be a useful means for accessing the community’s voice.

This pilot study has highlighted some of the difficulties in the service-learning relationship. If these difficulties are sanitised or diluted the engagement becomes a charity-oriented activity where little transformation is likely. Students are not challenged with the kinds of doubt and discomfort that lead to enhanced inquiry and reflection on the social forces at play in complex contexts. Communities are relegated to ‘sites’ and ‘recipients’ of services that students bring and are merely acted upon instead of engaged with. Higher education institutions are not challenged to review practices – from the level of curriculum relevance, to broader notions of knowledge production and ownership – and continue to play the Big Brother role in relationships with communities.

Higher education institutions need to be reflective about the form of service-learning they are engaging in and the limitations of more diluted processes of engagement. Claims about ‘impact’ or ‘community benefit’ need to be problematised and evaluated.

Relationships form the core of service-learning success, whether it is the relationship of the ‘university’ to the ‘community’ (at a broad meso-level) or the relationship of students with their smaller classroom communities (at a micro-level), outcomes hinge on these relationships. In service-learning engagements that have a social justice focus these relationships are likely to take place in challenging and messy contexts. This disequilibrium serves to drive change processes.

Remaining aware of a community’s perceptions and experiences of service-learning programmes is critical for successful engagement. This allows the community-university relationship to evolve

and remain beneficial to both partners because it provides an arena in which problems or issues of concern can be explicated and discussed. To respect and foster the relationship the preparation of students is vitally important, not just in terms of the overt issues (classroom management, appropriate engagement with community structures, activities in the community), but also in terms of more implicit issues (orientation to and respect for existing practices in communities, communication around day-to-day concerns).

The paradoxical and ambivalent nature of the service-learning experience has an impact on the role that students play in communities. Although students are generally encouraged to approach communities with humility and as fellow learners, in order for communities to benefit there also seems to be a need for them bring something to the engagement, some sort of 'expertise'. This dilemma of expertise requires further investigation. As Billig et al (1988, p.77) comment: "If the expert is too friendly the claim to expertise is endangered, whereas too much technical expertise threatens the friendliness. The human relations expert is the expert with the expertise to balance the competing claims of equality and authority, and to do so in an authoritatively friendly manner." The development of this kind of expertise usually requires experience with reflection, which, paradoxically, is exactly the object of attainment in service-learning.

As with any developmental process, there are unintended outcomes and consequences. The service-learning course set out to assist communities with the development of life skills. The children said that the most important benefit for them was a desire to further their studies; the students were positive role models.

The assumption by universities that service-learning is mutually beneficial should not remain unquestioned. The arrogance of this assumption appears to be perpetuated through research methods that silence the community's voice. Through using participatory techniques (and attempting to move towards a more participatory approach) this study revealed a more complex and ambivalent relationship.

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