The community voice on service-learning: A good practice guide for higher education

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Abstract

The growth of service-learning in higher education is attributed to its potential to enhance academic learning and contribute to the quality of life in communities, thus benefiting both the higher education institution and the community. Whilst acknowledging the importance of student outcomes, this article focuses on the community dimensions of service-learning in higher education. The article presents the community perspective on community needs, SL benefits, students' performance and areas of improvement in SL practice. It also highlights a gap in higher education in terms of the lack of research on the community dimension of service-learning. The article argues that SL practice could improve and its impact on communities could increase if the voice of the community is heard. The article calls for increased community involvement and partnerships in the evaluation process that relates to the planning and implementation of SL. The article therefore attempts to fill a gap that has been noted as a glaring omission in the literature.

Introduction

Increasing calls for higher education institutions to show greater responsibility and commitment to the socio-economic development of communities have resulted in an initiative by the Joint Education Trust (JET) to pilot community engagement initiatives. The Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) that also received JET/CHESP funding in September 2003, piloted seven Service Learning (SL) projects in 2004 and created a SL office with a SL coordinator and an administrative assistant. The office grew to a SL department in 2007 with six full-time staff members who support lecturers in six faculties and across campuses of the merged CPUT. As part of their function, university community partnerships were established with a variety of community-based organisations (CBOs). Some of the CBOs attracted more than three SL projects each as they had a wide range of needs in 2007.

Although annual SL Open Days were organised with the purpose of bringing together all the relevant stakeholders to show-case and reflect on SL activities, it became evident that more in-depth community-based research was necessary to improve our SL practice. A research project was designed to investigate what community partners said about our SL practice in relation to their community needs, community benefits, students' performance and areas of improvement.

Although impact studies on SL have been given much attention in global literature, there are few studies that focus on the voice of the community in relation to SL. Such studies are necessary as they could encourage the involvement of the community in evaluation that could in turn lead to an improvement of SL.

Literature review

Defining Service-Learning

Various studies have defined SL in different ways (Tsang 1998: Troppe 1996; American Association for Higher Education 1993). Although there are different meanings and interpretations of SL, it is generally accepted that its key element is its explicit connection to academic coursework. This is reflected in Bringle and Hatcher's (1995, 113) definition of SL as a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to get further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility". Service-learning is therefore regarded as one form of community engagement that has the potential to integrate students' community engagement experience with academic study so that learning is enhanced and a recognised community need is met (Smith and Saltmarsh 1998; Decker 1998).

Responsiveness of SL to community needs

Several studies highlight the importance of identifying and analysing needs before any intervention takes place (Babbie and Mouton 2002; Petersen 1998: Bernhardt 1998; Turrell 1980). In support of the needs analysis Maybach poses the following question: "If in the process of service-learning we are not hearing the individual service recipients' voices and are not addressing their long-term needs, whose voice and needs are of utmost concern? (1996: 43). Supporting the same view Mouton and Wildschut (2002) attribute the failure of some SL programmes in South African higher education institutions to unresponsiveness to the real community need. This article also calls for serious consideration of the community voice and needs in SL endavours and hopes to address the dearth of research in this area.

Partnerships for SL

There is enthusiasm around the world for greater participation and active involvement of the wide variety of interest groups in order to address the social and economic needs of the people (Teichler 2000; Wessels, Mosime and Seitheisho 2000; Foster and Stephenson 1998; Garrick and Kirkpatrick 1998; Teichler 1998; Birch 1988). Such enthusiasm stems from a belief that co-operative generation and application of knowledge and expertise could contribute to finding solutions to local, national and international demands. It is believed that higher education in partnership with communities, local and provincial governments, the private sector and international partners could play a major role in community development. In order for such partnerships to be meaningful all relevant stakeholders need to be involved in the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of SL. Fourie (2003) also indicates that the success of SL partnerships between universities, communities and other service providers is crucial in order for the planning and implementation of SL to make a positive impact. This article forwards the view that community involvement leads to meaningful partnerships and best practice models for SL.

Benefits of SL to the community

Most research on SL has been conducted on student outcomes rather than on community benefits (Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray 2001). Much research has focused on the assessing the impact of

SL on enhanced academic learning (Eyler and Giles 1999, 2001; Bransford and Schwartz 2000; Astin, Vogelgesand, Ikeda, and Yee 2000; Strange 2000; Boss 1994; Conrad and Hedin 1991; Osborne,Hammerich and Hensley 1998). However, the lack of research on the community dimensions of service-learning is a glaring omission in the literature (Mitchell and Rautenbach, 2005). In support of the community voice, Conrad and Hedin (1997: 54) state that "more and better qualitative research is needed to provide deeper understanding and texture to our knowledge of how service-learning can benefit our communities more productively". Some studies regard SL benefits to the community as obvious and document research without acknowledging the voice of the community. By focusing on community voices on service-learning, this article attempts to fill such identified gap.

Evaluation of SL

Bringle and Hatcher (2005: 39)) state that although there are many perspectives from which community engagement can be evaluated (funders, community impact, institutional goals), there should be "multiple sources of evidence on the impact of the work of the intended stakeholders" in order to make a strong case for documenting civic engagement as scholarship. It is the intention of this article to include the community perspective in the evaluation of our SL practice at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT).

Balanced between 'service' and 'learning'

It has been recognised that in some SL activities the learning goals are primary and service outcomes secondary or vice versa, and that service and learning intentions can either be viewed as separate or treated as complementary and having equal weight (Furco, 1996). By focusing on the community perspective this article attempts to encourage the view that greater congnisance be take of the fine balance between service and learning in the development of SL programmes so that community needs are linked to defined learning expectations for students.

Methodology

The focus of the research reported in this article was on the community voice on SL with the purpose of evaluating and improving our SL practice. The following research question was formulated for the study: *What do community partners say about our SL practice in relation to the community needs, community benefits, students' performance and areas of improvement?*

The qualitative research paradigm shaped the data gathering methods and research procedures that were used in the study. The research was conducted with the aim of obtaining in-depth descriptions and an understanding of social actions and events (Babbie and Mouton 2001) from the perspective of the community in the context of SL, as it is practiced at CPUT.

The community partners who were involved in more than three SL projects were selected and interviewed from the beginning of July 2007 to mid-September 2007. The interviews were conducted by a student who was offered a six-month internship as a research fellow (from July to December 2007). The student was registered for a Masters Degree in Development Practice at The University of Queensland in Australia.

The participants were requested to respond to the following questions:

1. What were your community needs before your involvement in SL?
2. How did your community organisation benefit from SL?
3. How was the performance of the students?
4. What are your suggestions for improving SL?

The responses to the questions were analysed, which was characteristic of qualitative research in that it was interpretative. The responses of the interviewees (verbal data) to the questions were summarised and organised into different themes (thematic analysis).

The research findings

The following section presents the responses of the community partners who were interviewed in order to evaluate the SL practice and identify areas of improvement.

Responses on community needs before involvement in SL

Training

A wide range of training needs was mentioned, including computer training, pattern-making, designing, baking, gardening, CV writing, bookkeeping, fundraising and marketing, as well as needs related to social development work. In addition the community partners also requested support and training in education and child development issues and educational programmes related to the youth.

Human Resources

Most community organisations highlighted the need for more manpower. The reasons for needing extra hands were related to the administrative work of community centres and the need to save cost of employing more staff. "The community centre is not getting lots of funds, so having the students helps financially".

Equipment

Most community organisations were in need of more equipment (sewing machines, button making machines, computers, printers, etc). They stated: "Our computers are too slow; we need more computers and better software."

Sponsors

Some of the responses to the interviews indicated that the participants were hoping to receive financial support from the university.

The responses from all the community partners indicated that service learning projects were highly valuable and essential for their development. Some of the community partners made the following statements, expressing their support and belief that SL can make a difference in their lives. "*The student involvement in our organisation is like oxygen*". Their involvement is a "*boost to the community centre*". The community partners mentioned that they felt "*proud, acknowledged and highly valued*" when the students marketed their organisations and products. "*We could lift our*

heads when the students were talking about us." They also indicated that the exchange of information and knowledge between the students and community partners created a strong bond and that computer training gave them a sense of worth and hope for a better life. "*Before I came here I used to sit and play with the computer, now I know how to type and how to open files … I believe one day I will be very good*." Some community organisations highlighted the bonding effect of SL even after the completion of the SL project. They stated that "*the students still keep in touch with the organisation. We are proud of their achievements and confident they will return to support us after getting full time employment*." Examples of graduated students who are still supporting the community organisation were cited.

The community partners mentioned the following benefits:

• Getting extra hands where there were limited human resources
• Marketing of their organisations and products
• Assistance with office administration e.g. improving and updating filing systems
• Free training (skills transfer) e.g. computer training, CV writing, bookkeeping and gardening.
• Gaining new knowledge e.g. on Employment Act
• Assistance with fundraising and getting creative and exciting ideas
• Income generation through selling vegetables grown in community gardens
• Support and encouragement from students from different backgrounds

Responses on the performance of students

The participants were generally impressed by the resilience and hard work of students. The students were described as willing to help wherever possible. The comments from the community partners included the following:

> "*They are doing a good job*".
> "*Often, the students go beyond their duties to help the staff*".
> "*Very involved, very committed and passionate about what they do*"
> "*They are doing their best*"
> "*They do it because they love their work*".
> "*Please send your hard-working students to us again in the future!*"

As part of the work, children in the community were invited attend classes run by students. In response to this, participants stated that the children were more comfortable working with students than with older people. They "prefer to be trained by young students than being trained by people in their 40's. Having someone younger sends the message of on-going learning. The students are role models for the youth".

Referring to horticulture training the participants stated that "*it was very nice and interesting.*" "*I learnt how to cut plants, what you can use and what you can plant.*"

One community member was so impressed with the classes that he was motivated to further his studies. Some community members were proud of their achievements. "*One* [community member] *could not sleep well as she was excited about getting a certificate of participation the following day*". "*When we attended the* certificate ceremony the students and lecturers treated us like royalties [sic]".

Not all was as easy-going as this. Some of the participants' comments indicated that circumstances in community sites compelled the students to make changes to their facilitation styles.

"*In the beginning, the computer trainees* [community members] *were fearful to approach the students as they perceived them to be more knowledgeable. However, after realising the trainees' concerns, the students came down to the level of the trainees. They changed the pace to suit the class. They became more patient*".

Suggestions for improving service-learning

The suggestions for the improvement of the SL initiatives from the community partners are classified into three categories that relate to the planning, implementation and evaluation of SL.

Planning

Most of the suggestions from the participants revolved around the planning of SL. Stressing the importance of proper planning, the participants stated: "We learn as the community team from academic institutions, so the planning process is important".

The following suggestions were made with regard to the planning of SL.

- Conduct a needs analysis and engage the community organisation in decision making
- Provide the community partners with clearer guidelines and a proper brief on what is to be achieved (e.g. learner outcome documents, project deliverables, etc).
- Provide the community centres with a timetable on student visits so that it can be displayed on the wall for all the community staff to see.
- Students should be well-prepared and made aware of the social differences so that they could adopt relevant instruction strategies when they deal with adult learners in the community.
- Share information about the Service Learning policy and set clear expectations (e.g. roles of the staff, management, project start and end dates, etc).
- Build strong relationships by encouraging regular communication between all the stakeholders.

Implementation

With regard to the implementation of SL, the following suggestions were made:

- There should be active involvement by academic staff for the purpose of supervision, monitoring and ensuring that students are on track. The implementation of SL needs to be monitored to ensure the achievement of the objectives, both academic and service.
- Encourage community-driven and initiated projects (e.g. do with the community and not for the community)
- Strengthen the links between students, lecturers and community organisations (e.g. site visits by lecturers, regular supervision and information sharing on student assessment and clear project 'deliverables')
- Link service learning to internship programmes
- Get more students involved and allocate more time for student involvement in the community.
- Encourage a multi-disciplinary approach with would involve other departments, for example personal management and financial management.

Evaluation

- Encourage project documentation (e.g. record the process undertaken and the key lessons - success and failure, so that there is an effective feedback mechanism)
- Transfer learning from existing projects to other disadvantaged communities, e.g. how the project started, the successes and failures, so that any duplication is avoided and resources are effectively used
- Using research and quality management, evaluate service learning projects and provide regular reports.

Discussion

From the responses of the participants to the interviews it became clear that there was a wide range of community needs. An analysis of the needs in relation to the responses on the performance of students and on community benefits indicated that some of the community needs (e.g. training needs and manpower) appear to have been met through SL. However, the participant responses suggest that related to the community needs indicated that not all the SL projects were responsive to the needs of the community. Some of the community partners were not aware of what the students were supposed to do. These findings are in no way different from previous studies (Mouton and Wildschut, 2005) in which the authors indicated that in many cases a needs assessment was not done prior to the implementation of SL. It also became evident that there were needs that could not be met through SL. Such needs included the financial support and equipment.

It is important to clarify the concept and process of SL so that there is common understanding on the need to match community needs with curricula and student outcomes that. It is also significant to clarify the role of higher education institutions in SL so that all the stakeholders understand that institutions of higher learning are not in a position to fund community organisations but could for example assist with business plans by involving students who are registered in the Faculty of Business.

Although some of the community partners were not fully briefed about what to expect in the SL, they indicated that they benefited from the SL activities and that they were impressed by the performance of students. There were calls for more students and more time for their involvement. The student involvement was valued and identified as a critical path for 'bridging' and building commitment for the welfare of the community at large.

The benefits of SL to the community have been noted in literature, both in South African and American literature (Youth Service America 2000). However, as already mentioned, there are few research-based studies that present SL benefits as perceived by the community.

In relation to the suggestions from the community for improving SL, it became clear that the time frames and planning need to be carefully structured and adhered to. There was also a need to improve documentation that relates to learner outcomes and project deliverables. The need to improve communication, interaction, supervision, student preparation and evaluation of SL was also highlighted as a key area of improvement. Other areas of improvement relate to the need to link SL to internship, to encourage cross pollination, to conduct research and document success and failure of SL projects.

Some of the mentioned areas of improvement are in line with documented problems that are associated with SL. Several studies (Gerber and Heet 2000; Perusek 1995; Johnson 1995) noted that some service learning courses have been characterised by a lack of efficient administration and communication on matters based on curriculum planning and assessment. They also indicate that SL demands proper co-ordination of activities and that it is time-consuming and labour-intensive. Therefore more human resources need to be deployed.

Conclusion

It is clear that SL is not easy to plan and implement as it involves partners with different backgrounds, philosophical understandings and interests. Although the problems related to the planning and implementation of SL are a great challenge to higher education, the positive outcomes of SL outweigh the negative ones. It would be a good idea to regard the problems of partnership oriented community-based learning as a learning process that needs continuous reflection, evaluation, passion and support. In this process universities are learning to work with communities and communities are also learning to work with universities.

Virtually all South African higher education institutions are interested in developing effective citizenship among students, and to form creative university-community partnerships but since SL is a new innovation in South Africa, it will take time for the planning and implementation to function properly. One way of ensuring that this happens well is to involve all the relevant stakeholders in its planning, implementation and evaluation.

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