

Power and participation in and through service learning

Ruksana Osman

University of the Witwatersrand

Gillian Attwood

University of the Witwatersrand

Ruksana Osman is Associate Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her teaching and research falls broadly in the areas of learning and access to learning in higher education. Her research work in the last five years has focused on the epistemological and philosophical challenges associated with service learning and prior experiential learning in higher education. She has been the recipient of fellowships from the Spencer and Carnegie Foundations.

Dr Gillian Attwood works in the field of adult education and participatory community development. She is a research associate at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and also works as an independent consultant. Dr Attwood has worked extensively in Lesotho, initiating and implementing a range of community development and ecotourism projects. These include environmental, health, education, and small business projects.

Abstract

In recent times there has been a proliferation of community service learning projects within universities. The aim of this paper is not to refute community service learning initiatives within higher education, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which power relations might be concealed within them, ultimately subjecting them to the very same forces they claim to be resisting. We urge for the need to go beyond rhetoric and to examine the underlying assumptions that inform current practices –explicitly or implicitly. Foucault’s work on power and empowerment has been found to be useful in understanding the relationships between service, power, participation and learning. We conclude by pointing out that all is not lost and propose reflexivity as a strategy that may assist to more critically interrogate the ways in which we recruit service learning and community participation into higher education in South Africa.

Key words: Community Service Learning, Power relations, reflexivity, community participation

Introduction

People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does. (Foucault, quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 187)

‘Service learning’ is essentially an experiential education approach in which students receive academic credit for performing community service. It is closely related to volunteer service and internships, but may be distinguished from these practices because it is designed to benefit the provider and the recipient of the service equally. In service learning, as Furco (1996: 5) points out, service must be provided *and* learning must occur.

Growing local interest in service learning reflects international trends in higher education. In North America, particularly, service learning has been employed as a strategy for educational reform. It is viewed as an avenue for universities to promote social engagement, responsibility and democratic awareness. In South Africa, the uptake of service learning is a response to the government's insistence that universities be more responsive to local and national developmental needs and that they engage in partnerships with other agencies to address social problems of poverty, unemployment and crime in surrounding communities and regions (see National Department of Education, 1997a; 1997b; 2001). In more recent time the preference for the term "civic engagement" has signaled a departure from the concept of service" (with its connotations of a reactive and one-way process) to notions of mutuality, partnership reciprocity, accountability and impact (Burnet, Hamel and Long, 2004) and to a two way "inter-penetration" between a university and the broader society (Mthembu, 2006, 8-9). Yet as Dhillon points out the transformative potential of civic engagement is rarely achieved, partly because of the "methodological anarchy and definitional chaos" (2005:212) surrounding partnerships. Billig (2000: 659) points out that the field of service learning is messy: service learning itself may be seen as a philosophy, a model or a pedagogical tool, and disagreements arise not only about how it should be defined and implemented, but also about what "best practice" looks like and the criteria to be used to assess its effects and impact. There is, however, a degree of consensus around the major components of service learning: "active participation, thoughtfully-organized experiences, focus on community needs and school/community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge, extended learning opportunities, and development of a sense of caring for others" (Bhaerman et al, 1998: 4).

While there is ample talk of components such as development, participation and caring for others in the discourse of service learning, there is little talk of the power relations implied when such components come together in a relationship or even about power embedded in the discourse as a whole. Yet power is embedded in all educational, political and economic systems, the discourses and the practices that we take for granted.

As service learning becomes more entrenched in institutional practices within universities it is clear that an area that needs our rigorous attention is the power relations implied when the components of service learning come together in a relationship between communities and universities. Service learning when brought into the university is in an essentially asymmetrical relationship with academic ways of learning and doing. The discourses associated with university have different origins, sites of practice and outcomes to the more experiential discourses associated with service learning. However, it is important to recognise that the discourses that characterise universities and communities are not as monolithic as sometimes assumed, and do provide spaces for negotiating alternative practices and responses to power relations.

In this paper we argue that one of the ways in which we can begin to move towards a more symmetrical relationship between service and learning and between community and university is when we explicitly explore the power relations that underpin this relationship, name the practices in this relationship and explore their workings. Accordingly, questions about power and participation need to be confronted.

Understandings of power

Power has been defined in a host of different ways by a range of people in divergent fields. However, for the purpose of this paper we draw on a Foucauldian perspective because this work is helpful in understanding the relationship between service, power, participation and learning – key elements in service learning initiatives.

Foucault does not see power as monolithic but rather as “fluid, and existing as a multiplicity of institutional and psychological forces” (ibid). Foucault argued that the workings of power are much more subtle than previously acknowledged and that rather than seeing power as a bipolar phenomenon, as either repressive or liberatory, we should see power as circuitous, as constantly circulating with no fixed end point. For example, teacher education students entering a fieldwork context (like a crèche or toy library) are reliant on the contextual knowledge of members of the community in which they undertake their service learning projects. Should this knowledge not be shared with students the service learning enterprise may be compromised and students may be denied the opportunity to learn. Likewise, if students do not share the pedagogical and theoretical perspectives which they bring, an opportunity to learn is denied yet again.

According to Foucault, power is continually shifting. It does not have a fixed source that can be tapped by some for use on others. It is not exercised at the will of an autonomous individual, it is not something that can be possessed, something which one person has and can exercise, while another cannot. Power is omnipresent, it is etched into the everyday actions of every person’s life, exercised continually by everyone, not only by the dominant elite, or in the case of this paper the academy and the academics.

As subjects, we are constituted by the system of power that surrounds us. This is the source from which power and control originates, rather than from a dominant group wishing to shape the world in a particular way. Actors (academics and communities) may certainly have intentions concerning outcomes, and may mobilise resources or engage in the management of meaning but the desired outcomes are not guaranteed.

So are all individuals merely casualties of the workings of this inescapable omnipresent force of power, or is it possible to hold onto a sense of hope, of human agency? What this suggests for educators concerned with the potential of service learning to promote development, education and participation, is that it is essential to accept that every one, at all times, is implicated in the workings of power. Rather than just accepting the practices associated with service learning as well intentioned, open, democratic processes, defined, directed and controlled by the participants themselves, it is important to examine how power plays out through everyday practices within these practices. Foucault helps us to see that even practices that supposedly equalise power relations are subject to those very power relations. As educators, it is important to name these practices and expose their workings. It means asking questions (of ourselves, our students our institutions and even our community partners) about the epistemologies and methodologies submerged in our everyday practices. It means excavating and critiquing the values, beliefs, relationships, histories and processes which underpin service learning – aspects taken for granted in the name of social responsibility and participation. It means asking what is being done to facilitate non-hierarchical, non-hegemonic power relations when we participate in joint initiatives. It is in this way that we

will come to better understand the site at which power is exercised and the site at which resistance and participation is possible.

Understandings about participation

Participation ... is too serious and ambivalent a matter to be taken lightly, or reduced to an amoeba word lacking in any precise meaning, or a slogan, or a fetish or, for that matter, only an instrument or methodology (Rahnema, 1992:126).

Like 'power', the notion of 'participation' has been understood in various ways. There are a host of definitions and interpretations, with varying explanations of how participation happens and what it does for people. This section maps out the assumptions underlying the notion of participation since the notion of 'participation' is an integral aspect of the service learning discourse. Participation has indeed become not only a widely accepted concept, but also a politically attractive slogan, and a broadly espoused objective in the fields of both education and service learning.

It is assumed that if people themselves shape their development, it is likely to be both more relevant and more sustainable. If people themselves choose to participate, they will be able to take charge of the process and craft it according to their knowledge and needs.

There is a cluster of assumptions embedded in these beliefs about the virtues of participation and exposing these assumptions allows one to gain a more critical perspective on participatory practices in service learning projects.

Inherent assumptions about freedom of choice and community interests

Within service learning discourse, an assumption is made that the choice to participate is open and free and people in a given community choose for themselves whether or not to take part in an initiative or programme. It is also assumed that those who do choose to participate, will freely and responsibly express their ideas, their desires, and their objectives, ultimately reaching a peaceful consensus that represents the best interests of the general whole-you give service and you receive learning.

The assumption embedded in the above notion is that communities are homogenous, static, consensual and harmonious, and also authentically motivated (Mohan, 2001; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). It is assumed that communities share common needs and interests, and want the best for everyone. Heterogeneity within groups is downplayed as differences are smoothed out (Mashinini, 2002). This kind of representation conceals power relations within communities, and masks competing interests at the intra-community level. In reality, power dynamics within communities constrain participation, and define who gets to participate. Often, contrary to expectations, it is not the most marginalised who participate, but those already in a position to access what the university has to offer.

Access to participation can also be influenced and manipulated from outside of the group, by the discourse itself. Particular expectations and requirements are subtly inscribed in the participatory discourse that frames participatory practices. Those 'participants' that 'get in' are those who agree to conform to the process and its requirements (at the cost of being reinscribed into the discourse). Rahnema (1992:116) calls this 'manipulated' participation: "... participants do not feel they are

being forced into doing something, but are actually led to take actions which are inspired or directed by centres outside their control". Here one needs to only think of the schools we choose to engage with and those we leave out of service learning initiatives; the communities we allow our students to have access to and those we exclude; the issues we choose to service and those we see as less important.

Co-option can also happen at the level of the discourse itself as participants are drawn into colluding with the terms of the discourse. For example, by agreeing to participate in service learning, participants concur that they need development and service (and by implication that they are 'underdeveloped'). They also subtly agree that that they will pursue the goals of the other (in this case university learning, university curricula and university notions of what constitutes knowledge) in the name of their own development or empowerment. By owning the development intention, the subjects of development collude in disguising the more covert agenda of the university, academic, course or programme. While this position may not be a just reflection of the intentions of all who promote service learning and its participatory agenda, it does draw attention to the way in which the notion of 'participation' can be co-opted by well meaning academics, who convert it into one of the many activities needed to keep the social responsibility agenda alive in the university. There is thus a naivety about the complexities of power and power relations that characterise understandings of participation in and through service learning. In agreement with Petersen's (2007) concerns with care and Noffke, et al's (1996: 171) position on multicultural education, we believe that service learning has "the capacity to be cooptive rather than transformational" when power, purpose and participation are not engaged with in theory and in our practices.

The way forward

Is there a way forward? What are the possibilities that universities and communities can genuinely participate in service learning initiatives?

The argument presented here does not deny that there are acts and processes of genuine participation. These might be seen in the sharing of knowledge and the negotiating of power relations within communities. The aim of the paper has not been to refute such practices, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which power relations might be concealed within them, ultimately subjecting them to the very same forces they claim to be resisting. There are several strategies that may help to more critically interrogate the ways in which power and participation operate.

Firstly, it is important to review the essentialist ('some have it - some don't') conception of power that dominates some of the discourse of service learning and community engagement. Such a view of power promotes a misunderstanding of where and how power is expressed, directing us to look for it in political structures and oppressive acts, rather than in everyday practices. We need instead a more nuanced understanding of power as a hybrid phenomenon that finds expression in multiple and diverse ways, many of which are invisibly embedded in educational practices (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Mohan, 2001).

A revised understanding of power will inevitably also mean that the notion of 'empowerment' needs to be reconsidered and its claims re-evaluated. Rather than seeing the recipients of service learning initiatives as passive and power-less participants who need to be em-powered (often according to a course or university agenda), we need to examine how people are already exercising power, and look carefully at how such power operates.

As university educators who are espousing the merits of service learning for our students together with our students we need to develop a broader analytical focus. Rather than looking simply at the learning that has occurred for the students, or the actions taken by a community organisation (which might be taken to indicate 'empowerment'), it is essential to look at the everyday practices that occur within service learning initiatives in the community in the name of service and participation. Looking closely at how knowledge is constructed and where power is expressed within everyday patterns of participation may provide the university and the community with more insight into the operations of power and 'empowerment' than will merely observing the outcomes.

In the final analysis we need to ensure that service learning initiatives within the university are not "low maintenance showcases" (Harper, Donnelly and Farmer, 2002: 24) of social responsibility but rather complex ever changing and dynamic pedagogies of learning which require constant engagement and reflection from the university and the community.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions. The first author would like to acknowledge that the writing of this paper was made possible by a 'Time-Out' Grant from the Carnegie Foundation and an 'Ad Hoc Research' Grant from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand.

References

- Baerman, R, Cordell, K & Gomez, B (1998). *The role of service learning in educational reform*. Raleigh, N. C: National Society for Experiential Education.
- Billig, S H (2000). Research on K-12 school-based service learning: The evidence builds. *Phi Delta Kappan*, May, 658-664.
- Burnet JA, Hamel, D and Long, LL (2004). Service learning in graduate counsellor education: Developing multicultural counselling competency. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 32, 180-192.
- Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001). The case for participation as tyranny. In B. Cooke and U. Kothari (Eds), *Participation: The new tyranny?* London: Zed Books
- Dhillon, JK (2005). The rhetoric and reality of partnership working. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 29 (3), 211-219.
- Dreyfus, H.L. & Rabinow, P. (1982). *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Furco, A (1996). Service learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. In Taylor B (ed). *Expanding Boundaries: Serving and Learning*. Washington: Corporation for National Service.
- Hardy, C. and Leiba-O'Sullivan, S. (1998). The power behind empowerment: Implications for research and practice, *Human Relations*, 51 (4): 451-483.
- Harper, T, Donnelly, E and Farmer, F (2002). Theorizing the 'relatively untheorized': Three contributions to understanding service learning. Unpublished paper presented at the second international conference on service learning. Nashville: Tennessee.
- Mashinini, V. (2002). Financing rural development in Lesotho. *Africa Insight*, 32(1):30-36.
- Mohan, G. (2001). Beyond participation: Strategies for deeper empowerment. In B. Cooke and U. Kothari (Eds), *Participation: The new tyranny?* London: Zed Books.

- Mthembu, T (2006). Engaging with society. *Arena*, 2 (1), 8-9.
- National Department of Education 2001. The National Plan for Higher Education. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- National Department of Education 1997a. The White Paper on Education and Training. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- National Department of Education 1997b. A programme for the Transformation of Higher Education. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Noffke, S. E., Clark, B. G., Palmeri-Santiago, J., Sadler, J.& Shujaa, M 1996. Conflict, learning and change in school/university partnership: different worlds of sharing. *Theory into Practice*, 35, 165-172.
- Petersen, N 2007. Community Service Learning and Teacher Education: about 'otherness' and locating the self. Unpublished dissertation: University of Johannesburg.
- Rahnema, M. (1992). Participation. In W. Sachs, (Ed), *The development dictionary - A guide to knowledge as power*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
-

Professor Ruksana Osman

Faculty of Humanities
Wits School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Private Bag X 3 Wits, 2050
Telephone office +27 (0) 11 717-3060
Fax+ 27 (0) 11 717-3009
E-mail: ruksana.osman@wits.ac.za