Community engagement in the university curriculum: Theoretical Foundations - are they working for Hospitality Management students?

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Abstract

This study looks at the impact of theory and classroom contact linked to the real world of Community Engagement needs, within the environment of a school preparing students for the hospitality industry. Developing campus-community partnerships is a core element of well-designed and effective civic engagement, including service learning and participatory action research. Breier (2001: 6) comments that "at an institutional level, responsiveness to the needs of individuals and of society has become a key theme in university statements". The question that needs to be answered is how many of these statements have been translated into sustainable actions, and how this is then brought into our classrooms and in theory.

One of the defining characteristics of the contemporary models of civic engagement is mutually-beneficial collaboration, in which all persons contribute knowledge, skills, and experience in determining the issues to be addressed, the questions to be asked, the problems to be resolved, the strategies to be used, the outcomes that are considered desirable, and indicators of success. Clearly again, referring to all persons we have to ask the question, did we include our students in this?

Key words: Hospitality industry, curricula, student preparation

Introduction

These qualities that interactions in civic engagement are expected to possess are what define new and different approaches for how the university develops civic engagement, outreach, and public service (Bringle, Games, 7 Malloy, 1999a; Colby, Ehrich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Harkavy & Pucket, 1994; Jacoby, 2003; Langseth & Plater, 2004; Percy, Zimpher, Brukardt, 2006). Such interactions involve complex and dynamic relationships that are necessarily subject to re-negotiation over time and that hold potential to catalyze significant growth for the participants as well as substantial new work and new knowledge production. This **knowledge production** is aiming at getting the student to participate and pass this on to a community. In putting this process together**,** have we provided this student with book knowledge, or have we made sure of a solid understanding on the students' side? Students in the Hospitality Management field are very often removed from the real impact of the needs within a specific community.

Progress on developing, understanding, and evaluating relationships contributes a key goal for practitioners and researches that can enable civic engagement activities to become more effective and more meaningful work for all constituencies.

The university can develop an intellectual foundation for such community engagement. It can do this by integrating the key aspects of the university's mission, teaching and research with service providers and communities. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa have to respond to the challenges of creating an academic environment that targets the development and transformational requirements put to them by government in a unique and decisive way. According to Bender (2007) HEIs need to be seeking ways to be more relevant regarding social and economic problems. In this paper the author would also like to reflect and look at the social needs of our students.

Service learning has introduced a new approach to the concept of partnerships in higher education. The concept is underpinned by a notion of reciprocity in learning and exploration that result in a range of benefits following from joint endeavours and interaction between university, community and service providers (CHE, 2004). Service learning responds to the needs and opportunities of individuals and the community and links up with specific learning goals and experiences for students.

How are these experiences are are **then introduced to our students? Are the theoretical foundations that we have in the curriculum really standing up in the world of the student?**

The development of the pedagogy of service learning as a vital part of community engagement in the South African higher education landscape has been established. The community, in partnership with higher education, challenges traditional learning models. A shared understanding of the definition of service learning and community engagement has developed in South Africa mainly through the contribution of the CHESP programme (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slamat, 2008). According to Pandor (2008) CHESP has been seminal in making community engagement an integral part of teaching and research.

I can generate several other matters of contention with respect to service-learning, but would like to focus on one particular critic of academic service-learning, that is, that it lacks a well articulated theoretical/conceptual framework – in short that it is not making the student really interested in this new venture in the academic world, (see Giles and Eyler 1994:77). Often when new social or educational phenomena emerge its protagonists respond to criticisms of it by searching for a theoretical alibi (or alibis). Community service-learning is no exception. In response to criticisms of the field Giles and Elyer (1994) wrote an article with the main title, *the theoretical roots of service-learning in John Dewey.* The title of their article is perhaps a little misleading because what Giles and Eyler

do is to use the works of the pragmatist Dewey to (re)construct a conceptual framework for service-learning. Their exercise did not simply involve digging through academic "soil" to discover the "roots" of service-learning. Their exercise was one of active (re) construction and selection.

Service-learning therefore appears well placed to fulfil many goals of an African university and is being explored by local academics as a means through which to:

- Access indigenous knowledge systems (Von Kotze 2004)

- Increase the "knowledge, skills and ability to labour" that constitute the "human capital" necessary for sustainable livelihoods (de Gruchy 2005)

- Produce applied (Mode 2 type) knowledge (Subotzky 1999)

- Enhance the sustainability of both community development initiatives and of higher education institutions themselves by making more apparent their relevance (Erasmus and Jaftha 2002) and

- Bring community voices into the knowledge-making arena which currently somewhat exclusively occupied by higher education, the State and business Bawa 2003).

If all of this is in place, and we have the evidence of that, this study would again focus on the students' real understanding of this concept within the academic arena.

Literature Review

Data collection and participants

The research was conducted within a year module subject at the School of Tourism and Hospitality (STH), over a period of three years, 2011, 2012 and 2013. Participants, (second year students), were

asked the same open ended questions at the end of each academic year. Care was taken to ensure the identity of each participant was not revealed. Participation was voluntary. After completing the questionnaires, participants submitted these questionnaires to the author for analyzing and capturing the data. It is important to mention that questionnaires were done at the **end** of each academic year.

The appreciative inquiry process of **Discover, Dream, Design** and **Destiny** as outlined by Cooperrider (2005) was followed in this study, and the entire interview process for this study was conducted in according with this pattern. Although the emphasis was placed on the student, more and more information from the communities surfaced and would be reflected in the dream stage.

Giles and Eyler (1994:77) point out that service-learning does not need a theory simply for the purposes of social and politically legitimacy and they also do not believe that theory development is a natural step in the evolution of service-learning. They instead argue that theory is necessary for developing and refining a solid research agenda for service-learning. Through this study the evidence clearly indicates that in some cases we totally lack the understanding of our student's social circumstances. It is difficult for a student to relate to somebody else's needs, if they are not in the correct frame of mind.

Giles and Eyler draw mainly on two works of Dewey, *How we think* (1933) and *Experience and Education* (1938) and construct nine areas for theory development and testing in relation to service-learning. I briefly summarise these nine areas, with my own comments, in italic:

- *The continuity of experience.* This relates to whether there is a development continuum in service-learning. Put simply, do the activities done in adult stages of learning build on those of earlier stages? ***Our research outcomes shows that students would not continue with CE after***

*completion of their studies. Did
we then fail to create life time
awareness with the student?*

- *The principle if interaction.* This
  concerns whether service-learning
  experiences differ because of
  different interactions between
  individuals.

- *Inquiry.* This centres around to
  whether engagement in service-
  learning stimulates a need or
  demand for further knowledge.
  *During the interviews some
  students indicated that they
  would like to further their
  knowledge in the field of CE.*

- *Reflective activity.* This
  concentrates on whether it can be
  empirically demonstrated that
  reflection creates learning by
  linking experience and education.
  In other words, is complexity in
  problem solving an outcome of
  reflection in service-learning? *Our
  outcomes clearly show that
  students did not understand the
  reflective process.*

- *Truly educative projects.* This
  relates to whether Dewey's four
  criteria for educative projects can
  be demonstrated and tested.

  1 **"Must generate
  interest".**
  2 **"Must be worthwhile
  intrinsically".**
  3**"Must present problems
  that awaken curiosity and create
  a demand for information".**
  4**"Must cover a
  considerable time span and be
  capable of fostering
  development over time".**

- *Concrete and abstract knowledge.*
  This centres on whether service
  learning participants develop and
  demonstrate a balance and
  abstract knowledge.

- *The Great Community.* This relates
  to whether service-learning leads
  to valuing of community and
  whether it promotes the creation of
  community.

- *Citizenship.* This relates to whether
  service-learning promotes the
  development of social intelligence;
  does it foster participant's belief in
  their ability to solve problems; does
  it lead to a commitment to
  citizenship.

- *Democracy.* This concerns
  whether the ideal of democracy
  can be applied to service-learning
  and whether it can be developed
  and sustained in contexts of
  diversity and conflict.

The strengthening of community voices
within higher education, the two-way flow
of knowledge and relationships
characterised by dynamic equilibrium and
equity were emphasised in the delivering
of the academic work offered in the
classroom to students. The author drew
mainly on the two works of Dewey, *How
we think* (1933) and *Experience and
Education* (1938) when putting together
the academic work offered to students.

The following topics are offered in this
course, under the heading of Civil
Citizenship

*Economy, environment and development,
Poverty and unemployment, The holy
trinity – race, class and gender, Local,
national and global interests, Freedom of
press / media freedom, Sex, sexuality
identity, HIV and AIDS, Option,
information, knowledge, Debate,
argument, critique, and The power of the
internet.*

Research Methodology

The discovery phase

When one refers to research
methodology, they refer to the extraction
from the data (Leedy and Ormond 2010).

Each year would be discussed separately and then put into a table
2011, Response of the questionnaires

Number of participants	Questionnaires issued	Questionnaires received back
26	26	20 (77%)

2012, Response of the questionnaires

Number of participants	Questionnaires issued	Questionnaires received back
24	24	22 (92%)

2013, Response of the Questionnaires

Number of participants	Questionnaires issued	Questionnaires received back
27	27	25 (93%)

In total 77 questionnaires were issues and 67 (87%) were received back and analysed.

Main Findings

Dream Stage

CE Activities				
	Yes	**No**	**Not sure**	**Total**
Q1. Are you aware that the CE actions in Universities' are making a change in communities?	12	55	--	67
	17.9%	**82%**	--	**100%**
Q2. Is academic service learning theory well presented in class?	39	28	--	67
	58.2%	**41.7%**		**100%**
Q3. Where possible, were you able to relate the academic work to real world situation, i.e., your experiences in the community through your project?	11	52	4	67
	16.4%	**77.6%**	**5.9%**	**100%**
Q4. Would the class room activities, (academic work), give you a better understanding of activities in the community?	12	55	--	67
	17.9%	**82%**		**100%**
Q5. Would you yourself be involved with CE related matters after your studies, with the experience you gained in this field?	13	49	5	67
	19.4%	**73.1%**	**7.4%**	**100%**
Q6. Was the academic work well researched and relevant to the CE project?	29	30	8	67
	43.2%	**44.7%**	**11.9%**	**100%**
Q7. Did you find that the UJ supported you and your group in executing your activities related to the communities, i.e. financial support, transport ext?	5	61	1	67
	7.4%	**91%**	**1.4%**	**100%**
Q8. Was the reflective activities a demonstration of experience and education, could you link this in the service-learning area?	5	59	3	67
	7.4%	**88%**	**4.4%**	**100%**

Was the CE project sustainable?

3%

97%

No

Yes
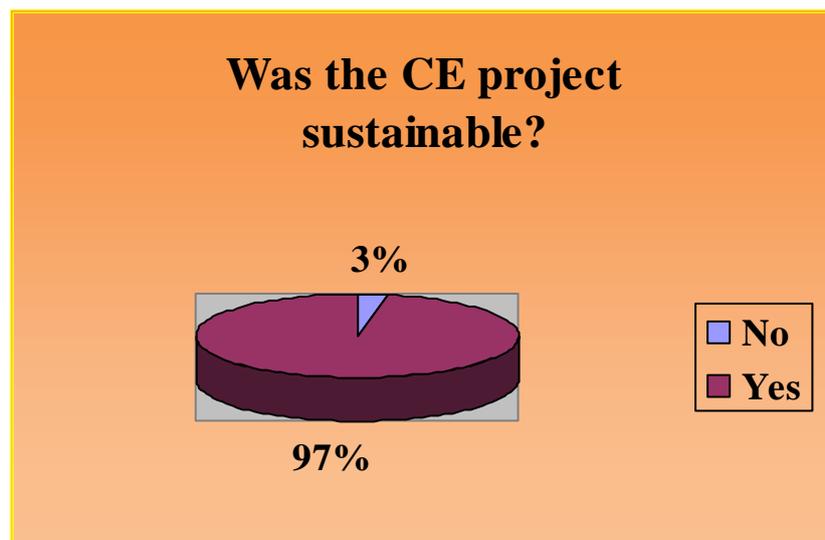
Over a period of 3 years, the student's perception of CE has not really changed. Alarming factors came forward, that students are only doing this because it is another subject to pass. 73.1% students admitted that they would not ever look at doing CE in their own private lives!

Are our theoretical foundations then working? We are so focussed on the academic work and the interactions with the community, that we in most cases do not take the social status of our students into consideration.

During interviews it was clear that students had enormous problems to deal with in their own life's, and could not always relate to the needs of other people when they to go hungry! This is the reality that we as educators have to face and pay attention to. More intense research needs to be done in this field so we could get to the core of the problem and address this.

Students clearly indicated that they felt this project was sustainable, BUT, would this only be applicable to the community and its members? What impact did we make with the student?

Conclusions

Destiny

The participants were not really aware of the impact this module could have on the lives of the members in the community.

The research clearly shows that the participants struggled with finance and the support from the institution was not sufficient in rolling out the project. The way

ahead will require the UJ to shift further when it comes to engaging with communities. To embrace the full potential that exists on campuses and within our communities requires a movement forward towards engaging with one another. We the lecturers should engage more with our students, before setting out on a venture with the community. We should embrace the needs of our student's for a better understanding of the bigger picture. The embracing of all the resources will require a very large amount of funding as well as the involvement of many people. As Thomson, A. M., Smith-Tolkien, A., Naidoo T., & Bringle R. (2008:4) note;

> *"How to build partnerships between partners of unequal influence is neither straightforward nor assured, especially when one organization provided the financial resources in unexceptionally resource-poor environment as is the case with community NGOs and outside funders) and the other partner is a university with well-established cultures and deeply embedded policies".*

Community engagement practitioners should not shy away from issues that affect society or the student, but embrace and challenge them. (Odora-Hoopers, 2011). There is the potential for higher education to play its role on the South African stage, and ours is very unique with unique challenges, but it will take an unwavering commitment of academic excellence and dynamic reciprocal partnerships for this goal to be achieved.

I close with Kappelar's (1986:212) words, "I do not really wish to conclude and sum up, rounding off the argument so as to dump it in a nutshell for the reader. A lot more could be said about any of the topics I have touched upon … I have meant to ask the questions, to break out of the frame … The point is not to set of answers, but making possible different practice …"

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