

CHAPTER 4

Bringing the community into higher education

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Introduction

The third core function of community interaction in higher education is often viewed as the peripheral activity in the triad of academic tasks. Community interaction is seen as an imperative which often results in reluctant compliance rather than enthusiastic engagement. Notional value of community initiatives has been well articulated both internationally and nationally and calls on the sense of social justice, making a meaningful contribution to society, mutual benefits and reciprocity (Boyer 1990; Kolawole 2005; Waghid 2009; Hall 2010; Lange 2012). Community initiatives can contribute to transformation that is so vital in the historical context of South African higher education (Albertyn and Daniels 2009; Bitzer and Albertyn 2012; Leibowitz 2012; Petersen and Osman 2013). Despite cognition of the well-documented benefits of engaged activity, it is widely felt that many academics pay lip-service to community interaction and try to get away with the bare minimum. Undoubtedly, the reason for this could be ascribed to the innate tensions currently faced by universities and academics. This situation may be due to on the one hand, the reality of the globalised economy with the competitive, individualised focus of knowledge economies (James, Guile and Unwin 2013), and on the other hand, the social agenda which encourages engaged citizenship.

Universities thus need to remain relevant and preserve their integrity and also ensure they retain their accountability to the local context in which they are located. These tensions could result in inertia, but by shifting the focus from the imperative to a positive discourse, mutual learning and benefits can result. In this chapter I identify three elements involved in a positive framing of community initiatives: creative development, communal benefits, and collective visions. By bringing the community in, higher education could engage in reciprocal learning

in locating and creating a positive generative space for collaborative knowledge production and innovation.

Creative development

Creativity may be required to solve complex problems. When organising knowledge in new ways, both the process and the outcomes involve creativity (Frick 2012), what Hall (2009:11) refers to in a community setting as a “burst of creativity”. Successful hybridisation in knowledge-creation is part of a process of collective creativity. Garraway (2009) alludes to boundary work done by participants from both systems (university and community in this case), that enables the transfer of knowledge across boundaries and its successful hybridisation in creating new solutions to existing problems. Earlier, Dysthe Samara and Westerheim (2006:303) saw knowledge as a process and product of interaction. They referred to ‘dialogism’, where developing and transforming understanding takes place through tensions between multiple perspectives and opinions. Meaning is thus created in interactions amongst dialogue partners. However, Maskell and Malmberg (2007) suggested that the continuous process of selection and interactive knowledge creation comes through the varied individual responses to collective challenges and opportunities. Consolidating these perspectives, Filstad and McManus (2011) have proposed that the interconnected parts support and produce each other in a complex system.

In a creative endeavour there are thus often tensions among team members (Perez-Freije and Enkel 2007). If a university/community partnership is based on a reciprocal problem solving focus, then the tension need not necessarily be viewed negatively. McMillan (2009) contends that different knowledges, voices and experiences need to be seen as central to engagement practices. Relational agency, a term coined by Edwards (2011), acknowledges that when professionals solve complex problems in a collaborative work setting, both parties recognise distinctive expertise that varies across settings and contexts. Together with their individual expertise, partners bring their relational expertise which enriches and enhances responses in the setting. Edwards notes in addition, that relational agency refers to the capacity to work with others to “strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems” (2011:34). Furthermore, there is a need to constantly align the individual responses to the new interpretation of others who are working

towards the common vision. A cautionary note from Petersen and Osman (2013) where there are partners or boundary workers, suggests that it is crucial to take into account their relative positions of power and ensure that communal benefits accrue to all members in the system.

Communal benefits

Communal benefits ensue when there is a respectful collaborative partnership in the knowledge creation project. James (2006) argued that socially robust knowledge is called for where there is a balance between relevance and science. Both constituents benefit as the university is challenged to partner in solving contextual problems and conducting good quality science. Both higher education and the community need knowledge and novel ideas to solve complex problems in society. In a similar context Bartlett and Elliott (2008) suggest that social engagements often engender contexts appropriate for valuable change and learning. Consolidating these views, James et al. (2013) refer to the importance of knowledge, innovation and creativity for survival. Universities, who play a relevant role in society, clearly are a vital part of this process. Problem solving is found at the heart of the research process and the outcome of research is then the creation of new knowledge, as novel ways are unearthed to solve the problem.

Minkler (2004:686) refers to the importance of countering the ‘colonizing’ nature of research that is often found in community interaction attempts. The discrepant power can be diffused by focusing on communal paybacks or reciprocity in the partnership. Such communal benefits will emerge if there is relevant research, focusing on the involvement of all partners in the creation of knowledge to solve relevant problems (Wright, Williams, Lieber, Carrasco and Gedjeyan 2011). However, there may be discrepancies in power balances between the two parties as noted by Petersen and Osman (2013:17) who refer to the “traditional hegemonic position and dominance of academic knowledge”. Petersen and Osman (2013) assert that the university should not be the only partner defining and constructing knowledge but should also be involved with knowledge created in sites. As Minkler (2004:686) previously noted, it is important to guard against research which is “community placed” and not “community based”. If participation and ownership are not the hallmark of interactions, then the sustainability of these projects

is questionable. Engagement thus pushes at the “boundaries of conventional knowledge-making” (Hall 2009:5).

Ensuring communal reciprocal benefits in a complex environment characteristic of a community/higher education initiative is important. If there are cognitive constraints, they tend to limit the possibilities in searching for solutions, as participants only focus on their existing frame of reference (Maskell and Malmberg 2007). Partners should be taking part in their development process that ultimately leads to transformation on various levels. Transformative learning does not only occur on a cognitive level bound to the ivory tower but is dependent of other levels of engagement on a cognitive and affective level (Mezirow 2000). Transformation could thus be enhanced through engagement beyond the classroom in more complex environments by inviting the community into higher education. This observation is supported by McArthur (2010) who says we need to foster learning in public spaces.

According to Dysthe et al. (2006), active participation fosters growth and transformation of understandings. Leaving the ivory tower could enhance a more dynamic process of learning and transformation. Problem posing is a key element in the process of learning and learners and teachers are co-investigators in the mutual learning process (Shim 2008). Meaning is created in the interaction between dialogue partners where there is trust and awareness of mutual benefits to both parties. Both parties need to recognise each role players’ distinctive expertise when professionals work together in collaborative work settings. The type of expertise may vary across settings and contexts (Edwards 2013). The importance of cooperation for reciprocal learning to achieve objects of material and instrumental value as well as those of symbolic and ethical value is highlighted by Sabourin (2013). However, there is bound to be conflict inherent in any educational intervention based on reciprocity. Furthermore, Sabourin (2013) contends that cognitive conflicts are important for development of learning if it is done in the spirit of a joint search for knowledge. Thus, there is a need for a common vision.

Collective vision

There needs to be a unifying focus in the joint search for knowledge in a higher education context riddled with tensions to retain authenticity and integrity on the one hand and accountability and responsibility on the other. There is a constant dynamic involved by recognising the motives and values that others bring to the endeavour and interpreting them in the current context (Edwards 2011). By identifying a common mission or collective vision, it may be useful to work beyond the challenges posed by diversity of the two groups by focusing on a common purpose. Carlile (2004) contends that it is important to develop a common meaning to address differences in various sites in a system. This commonly established vision would provide a fruitful focus for the interaction between partners in a complex system. Edwards (2011) proposed that a common understanding is an emotional driver of activity which is identified when asking participants what matters to them. In noting the importance of holding on to a common meaning when differences arise, Carlile (2004) has observed that developing this common meaning is a process which involves negotiation and definition of common interests.

Having clarity of a collective vision is vital but furthermore, having pioneers to champion the cause would contribute to a positive discourse in community initiative. An example of the leading visionary role of a pioneer is illustrated through these words:

Creating social change requires someone who, in the core of her or his personality, absolutely must change an important pattern across her or his whole society by identifying the 'jujitsu points' that will allow them to tip the whole society onto this new path, and then persist and persist until the job is done (Drayton 2002:123–124).

Pioneers thus have a leading role in ushering the community into higher education. Their leadership could focus on providing the vision of the generative spaces provided by reciprocal learning, and the creative development of collaborative knowledge generation a collective vision and communal benefits. More academic pioneers are needed to champion this cause.

Conclusion

Academics need to focus on three elements when thinking about allowing the community into higher education: firstly, positive energy could provide a fruitful focus in community higher education initiatives by paying attention to the creative development process, secondly, the collective vision through which what matters is sensitively identified, and thirdly, the ensuing communal benefits to each partner. This positive energy of engaged activity is found in the unintended side effects of information sharing, the spill-overs of knowledge or “local buzz” in the community initiative (Storper and Venerables 2004, in Maskell and Malmberg 2007:607). Cognisance of creative development, communal benefits and collective visions in generating this positive energy will encourage more academics to welcome the community into higher education. Awareness of the generative spaces in higher education/community interaction could contribute to shifting the coercion imperative to a motivational force to enhance social justice and knowledge creation for sustainable and constructive change.

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