

WE CAN'T BE HERE FOREVER": UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON TERMINATING COMMUNITY-ENGAGEMENT RELATIONSHIPS

Lorenza Logan Fluks, Anthony V Naidoo.

Studies on community engagement (CE) focus on its benefits but not enough on termination and difficulties experienced at the personal level with exiting projects. A study on CE with service-learning students and volunteers at a South African university identified issues and themes pertaining to termination as systematic process, emotional responses to termination, and the need to find closure. This paper argues that termination should be more integral to CE processes, and considering that CE experiences can influence further involvement, it is important to end engagement processes more conscientiously than currently happens.

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INTRODUCTION

Community engagement (CE) refers to various curricular and co-curricular activities in which universities engage their students, often in collaboration with external organisations and communities¹ (Higher Education Quality Committee [HEQC], 2006). In South Africa the post-apartheid government emphasises the importance of CE in societal transformation and thus as an integral part of teaching, learning and research (Department of Education, 1997). Higher education institutions have established dedicated departments and processes to undertake, monitor and evaluate CE programmes, and academic departments encourage the adoption of service-learning objectives in their curricula. The aims of CE programmes include cultivating a sense of civic responsibility, developing graduate attributes, and providing practical experience while achieving learning outcomes (HEQC, 2006; Lazarus, 2007; Maistry, 2012).

In the university’s engagement with communities through CE projects, students are perceived as a pivotal link with the community; as major participants in CE, students represent the university while also affecting and benefitting from the social-educational process at a personal level (Maistry & Thakrar, 2012). International studies show students’ experiences of CE as being transformative, enhancing their personal and professional development (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Kiely, 2005; Knapp, Fisher & Levesque-Bristol, 2010). In South Africa, amongst other outcomes, CE gives students opportunities to enhance their cultural awareness through interaction with others from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, and exposure to different socio-economic contexts (Constandius, Rosochacki & Le Roux, 2014; Naudé, 2011, 2012, 2015). This paper speaks, in particular, to the local context and those elements of CE which are especially significant in the post-apartheid era.

Volunteering, that is, non-academic credit-bearing activities, has also been studied extensively internationally and locally, identifying enhanced personal development, improved self-esteem and sense of wellbeing, improved interpersonal skills and development of graduate attributes and professional competencies as being among the outcomes attained (Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Snyder & Omoto, 2008; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Putnam (cited in Taylor & Pancer, 2007) describes CE as building social capital. Holdsworth and Quinn (2012), however, argue that volunteering is not always a win-win situation and that benefits are not always spontaneous; this necessitates maintaining a critical perspective on volunteering so it “neither normalises students to social inequalities, nor perpetuates social injustice” (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012:124).

Service-learning, in particular, is widely recognised for its transformative potential in participants through opportunities for dynamic hands-on learning and continuous reflection (Kiely, 2005; Naudé, 2012, 2015). CE, in particular service-learning, has been described as a holistic academic experience that involves, and may transform, cognition and emotions. It also impacts on participants’ sense of civic duty (Thomson, Smith-Tolken, Naidoo, & Bringle, 2011) and morality (Eyler & Giles as cited in Strain, 2005), and enhances their cultural competence (Amerson, 2010). As already mentioned, this is important in the South African post-apartheid context, which still sees limited meaningful contact

¹ In this article CE refers to service-learning and student volunteer programmes. Service learning refers to students taking part in academic credit-bearing activities (e.g. Social Work students undertaking practical or field work with individuals, groups and communities). Volunteer programmes refer to extra-curricular activities and are usually led by students involved in leadership structures or university residences (e.g. programmes about life skills, sport and academic assistance).

between people of different racial and cultural backgrounds (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005; 2010; Tredoux & Finchilescu, 2010).

Social work and psychology students, in particular, are important in the CE scheme; their undergraduate academic education and practical work are carefully interwoven to prepare them for a professional career involving work with diverse groups and communities (Maistry, 2012). Students from academic programmes outside the humanities – for example, those studying engineering – may receive some academic input on the engagement process, but this is less integrated than in social work and psychology. While volunteering provides students with opportunities for engagement and personal growth during their studies at university, these activities are often less structured and more ancillary, and reflection is often less formal than in service-learning programmes (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012). Furthermore, the formal curriculum may not adequately prepare service-learning and fieldwork students for the vagaries of CE, but the training may offer valuable, experience-based skills and knowledge. Maistry (2012) argues that broader social values and social responsibility do not develop automatically in students through such programmes, and should be incorporated and guided purposefully in curricula and teaching. Students' experience of the CE engagement processes must thus be prioritised in organised and conscious ways, different from the current predominant focus on reaching learning outcomes in practice modules.

A holistic approach recognises that the local communities, where engagement programmes take place, influence the learning and transformative processes for students in important ways (Kiely, 2005; Strain, 2005; Thomson, Smith-Tolken, Naidoo & Bringle, 2011). This person-in-environment approach, in a diverse society such as South Africa, with its apartheid history and pervasive socio-economic inequalities (Akanbi, 2016; Statistics South Africa, 2018), means the CE context poses various challenges regarding engagement for students and community participants. In cross-cultural engagements, some students are faced with language and cultural differences, exposure to widespread poverty and deprivation, overwhelming crime in communities, and their own positionality in this broader context (Constandius et al., 2014; Naudé, 2012, 2015). Others encounter Western customs and culture first-hand for the first time, for example, old people in care homes, which is often bewildering to understand. Even students sharing language and cultural backgrounds with project participants find that the engagement process is not neutral, with personal and interpersonal challenges present involving power differentials relating to class, education and positionality of community participants predominantly as recipients of services provided in interventions (Berman & Allen, 2012; Fluks, 2017; Naudé, 2012).

Why foreground termination?

Studies tend to focus on CE goals and benefits, but not enough attention is devoted to termination and its associated difficulties at the personal level. While some effects of students' involvement in CE may be lasting (Kiely, 2005), the engagement period in a project or module is finite, hence the allusion in the article title – “we can't be here forever” – as articulated by a Social Work student interviewed in this study who attempted to make sense of her frustrations relating to the limitations of training interventions.

While termination is incorporated into group processes in disciplines such as psychology and social work, it remains understated in other disciplines and in the CE literature. CE models, especially service-learning programmes, follow a similar or set trajectories (Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Petersen & Osman, 2013). These typically start with preparing students for the engagement through an orientation session, sometimes involving a field visit to the community in which the project is located (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Students are prescribed readings on service-learning and reflection to use throughout the project's action phase (Petersen & Osman, 2013). Reflection through written exercises, peer group discussions and class presentations is emphasised in these readings and encouraged for students to make sense of their learning experience and adapt their practice for future sessions (Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Petersen & Osman, 2013; Wium & Du Plessis, 2016).

More recently, critical reflection has been emphasised to engage with notions of power, empowerment and positionality, or as an activity that stretches beyond an individualised process but that considers equally the experiences of the community participants (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Constandius *et al.*, 2014; Petersen & Osman, 2013; Swords & Kiely, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2011).

Structured reflection and debriefing sessions focused on the personal experiences of student participants appear to be included not nearly enough in some local CE programmes, particularly those emphasising academic over interaction outcomes (Fluks, 2017). Hence, volunteer project leaders and service-learning students often have to navigate their engagement on their own, assume leadership roles, and guide volunteers and project participants, with many students feeling overwhelmed by juggling other personal and academic responsibilities too (Fluks, 2017). There is thus a risk that students may leave CE projects with a sense of failure, dissonance and being emotionally uncared for. These feelings can lead to aversion or lack of interest in future projects, social responsibility in general (Kiely, 2005; Taylor & Pancer, 2007), or reticence to engage with people from different racial, language, cultural and socio-economic circumstances. Following the contact hypothesis that assumes, even avers, that cross-cultural contact can break down racial stereotypes, exiting engagements with negative perceptions can possibly reinforce stereotypes if students do not engage with the notion of stereotypes vis-a-vis their experiences in a supportive environment (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005).

Process in service-learning and group work practice usually involves devoting attention to continuous learning assessment, with the key focus on checking if students are acquiring the requisite skills, knowledge and learning outcomes. In local CE programmes, summative evaluation is generally used to assess whether the community has received the engagement benefits outlined in the programme as well as the student's engagement with the challenges arising from the engagement (Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Petersen & Osman, 2013). SWOT analyses may also be undertaken to enhance the programme for the next student cohort. The tendency to focus on programme evaluation (Scileppi, Teed, & Torres, 2000) under the pressure to complete outstanding tasks may overshadow the psychological component of terminating the CE relationships for the students; moreover, termination aspects, if present at all, may be positioned as merely coincidental to the evaluation process (Fluks, 2017; Maistry, 2012).

Various studies acknowledge the strong – and often described as ‘special’ – bonds that students form with community participants (Constandius *et al.*, 2014; Kiely, 2005; Naudé, 2015). Despite university-based engagements being short-term, about a year or less, bonds are nevertheless established, often making the termination process very emotional for the students and participants. Furthermore, as termination is typically not planned and monitored as part of the working stages of the engagement process, the greater focus is on overload of tasks and finishing reports as programmes wind up. Yet termination may evoke overwhelming feelings relating to separation from participants, loss and possible ambivalence, very likely to make it hard for student to make sense of the experience on their own (Alkana, 2006). This may lead to abrupt project endings, without a sense of closure for students. Yet termination can be a catalyst for positive growth (Alkana, 2006; Yalom, 1985), and students' experiences of CE with people in diverse communities are likely to influence further CE involvement as well as a community's receptiveness to new students entering the project in a new cycle (Kiely, 2005; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). This paper argues that it is important for curricular and especially co-curricular programmes to attend to ending engagement processes conscientiously.

Theoretical perspectives on CE and termination

The transformative learning framework of Kiely (2005) and therapeutic group dynamics (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014; Yalom, 1985) are useful in understanding appropriate termination in CE processes.

Kiely (2005) proposes five interconnected processes for transformative learning, namely (a) contextual border crossing; (b) dissonance; (c) personalising; (d) processing; and (e) connecting. *Contextual border crossing* describes how various elements in the service-learning context inform the transformational experiences of students (Kiely, 2005). Examples include personal histories, social

positioning, including race, class, gender, disability and participants' political histories. Programmatic elements are also important, including the design of service-learning and volunteer programmes. *Dissonance* refers to the discord or incongruence between the students' personal contexts and current beliefs and the new environment in which they engage (Kiely, 2005). Yalom (1985:271) asserts that "dissonance creates a state of psychological discomfort and propels the individual to attempt to achieve a more consonant state". *Personalising* refers to the students' emotional and visceral responses to dissonance, such as feeling uneasy or out of their comfort zone when engaging in communities different from their own (Kiely, 2005; Naudé, 2011, 2012, 2015). *Processing and connecting* are perceived as intertwined processes, where processing deals with the more cognitive and rational sense-making aspects, and connecting to the more affective experiences and connections formed with the people whom the students engage with.

In conceptualising processes in therapeutic groups, Corey et al. (2014) and Yalom (1985) identify five stages, which have direct links with the process of relationship forming in CE projects, for example, as observed in social work group interventions. *Stage one* involves pre-group considerations relating to the formation of the group, with Corey et al. (2014) highlighting the importance of detailed planning as this step involves the initial contracting and negotiation of norms, expectations and roles that inform the overall progression of the group process. *Stage two*, or the initial stage, involves orientation and exploration, in which members learn about the function of the group, get to know each other and explore expectations, with Corey et al. (2014) and Yalom (1985) highlighting here the importance of building trust. *Stage three* or the transition stage is characterised by resistance, conflict and members' positioning in the group space; issues of role, power and control are often central here (Corey et al., 2014). *Stage four* or the working stage is characterised by group cohesion and productivity towards collective goals (Corey et al., 2014), with an enhanced sense of mutual trust, increased interaction amongst members, and sharing of personal stories (Yalom, 1985). *Stage five*, termination, involves consolidation of learning and the process of ending the intervention (Corey et al., 2014), with Yalom (1985) cautioning that termination is not just about ending the group process, but also facilitation this, which may influence further actions beyond the group. Here, members are encouraged to apply benefits and learning accruing from the group process to external environments. This stage may also involve acknowledging sadness and loss relating to the ending of the group, uncertainty about participants' lives without the group, and allowing members' subtly expressing reasons not to leave the group (Corey et al., 2014; Yalom, 1985).

The above understanding of termination paves the way for the analysis below of this study's findings.

Methodology

Aims. This paper is part of a larger study exploring the psychosocial aspects informing the CE experiences of students at the individual and interpersonal levels, in the university, community and broader society (Fluks, 2017). This paper's aim is to foreground issues pertaining to termination of CE relationships, as described by service-learning students and volunteer project leaders at a South African university.

Research design. An explorative, qualitative research design was adopted to gain an understanding of the university students' constructions of their CE experiences. The researchers used the Generic Inductive Qualitative Model (GIQM) approach to grounded theory (Hood, 2007), which shares some similarity with traditional grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2011, 2014). The research strategies employed within GIQM include: purposive sampling methods, where further sampling was contingent upon emerging questions; an iterative approach, where data collection, memo writing and analysis were conducted concurrently; and constant comparative practice, adhered to during the coding phases (Charmaz, 2006, 2011, 2014; Hood, 2007). GIQM strategies used cease at the phase of rich description of themes and developing a conceptual framework, in contrast to traditional grounded theory which continues to develop a theory based on the data.

Study context. This study was based at Stellenbosch University, a formerly White and predominantly Afrikaans university in the Western Cape. This context is important to note as the students at this institution are predominantly White, upper and middle class, and engage with community project participants who are predominantly Black and Coloured, and come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Language, race and socio-economic differences are thus significant disparities in the students' CE experiences.

The students participating in this study were involved in a variety of CE projects, summarised in Table 1 in terms of settings, foci, duration and modes of engagement.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTION OF THE CE SETTINGS AND PROGRAMMES IN WHICH
STUDENTS WERE INVOLVED

CE settings and programmes	
Types of organisations where CE took place	Primary and high schools located near the university Multi-purpose community centres (e.g. after-school facilities) Governmental and non-governmental social service institutions, including hospitals, homes for people with disabilities, homes for elderly people and a correctional facility A multidisciplinary centre for comprehensive healthcare services
Project participants	Primary school learners from as young as 5 years of age in Grade R up to high school children Adult and child clients identified by social work fieldwork supervisors at the designated placement sites
Project focus at high schools	Academic assistance in Mathematics Career and life planning Leadership skills development Life skills (e.g. assisting learners to critically think about their community and to engage with social issues; and assisting youths to develop and conduct their own community initiatives)
Project focus at primary schools	Structured and free-play activities Arts and crafts Homework assistance Sports activities Life skills (including topics such as leadership development, diversity, religion, teamwork, friendship, communication, adolescence as a developmental phase, resilience in relation to social issues such as crime and violence in the community)
Project focus at community-based centre	Assistance with homework and research for assignments Computer literacy Life skills programmes (addressing topics such as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, self-esteem, alcohol and drug abuse) Community-related projects (e.g. youth development projects) Sourcing bursaries for high school seniors and assistance with applying to university (e.g. one organisation also pays applicants' registration fees) Career guidance and information about options after high school
Project focus at home for people with disabilities	Talking about topics that participants identify
Project times	During school time After school Saturdays (one university resident's project)
Project duration	Volunteers usually sign up for an academic year or one semester Service-learning modules run typically for one quarter or semester Social Work students are involved in different projects over the four-year programme Once-off engagement activities (e.g. Mandela Day activities, celebrated annually on 18 July; and MAD Community Day activities, annual campus-wide community interaction orientation for first-year students)
Mode of engagement	Individual work: working one-on-one with children or adult clients (Social Work students) Group work: facilitating programmes with groups at schools or organisations (Social Work students and other service-learning students and volunteers) Community work: facilitating programmes aimed at the broader community. Facilitated through schools or other organisations (Social Work students)

Participant recruitment. Purposive sampling methods were used to recruit from a specific student cohort (Creswell, 2009), aimed at including a variety of study fields and CE contexts. Some students participated in CE as part of academic courses and some voluntarily. The campus office responsible for CE was contacted for a list of current projects. Student-led projects affiliated with student organisations and residences, and project leaders were invited by e-mail to participate. Specific service-learning groups were targeted, such as Social Work students in community projects spanning several years, Psychology students involved in practice modules, and engineering students for perspectives outside the humanities. A total of 35 students (between the ages of 20–29) participated in the study, detailed in Table 2 according to the seven focus group interviews held.

TABLE 2
AN OVERVIEW OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

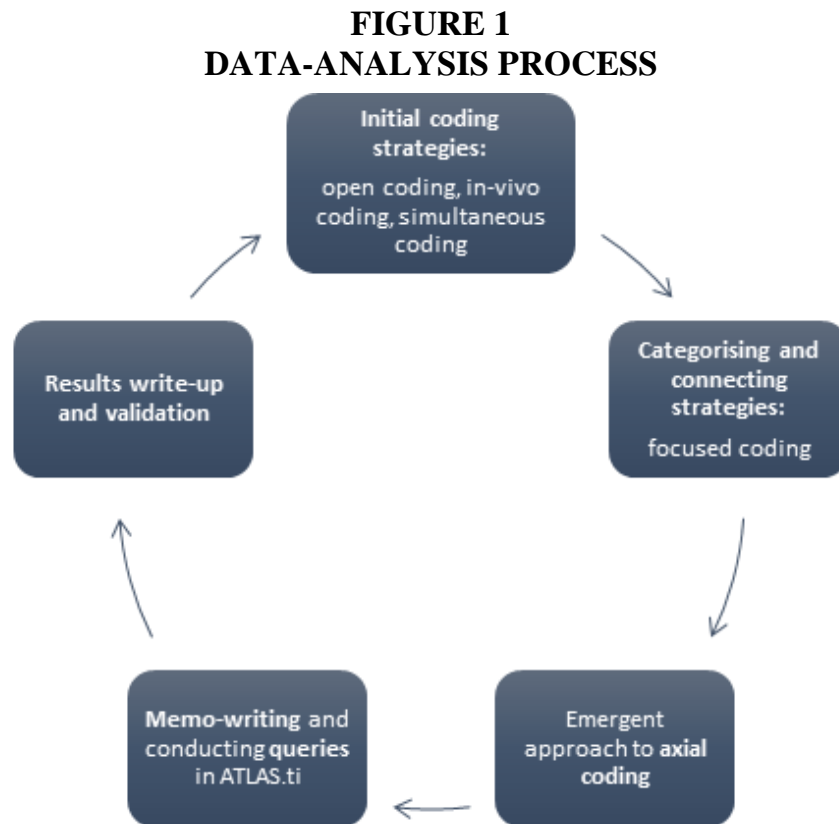
Focus Group No.	Group Description	No. of Participants	Service-learning or Volunteer Project	Gender	Ethnicity
1	Student project leaders	4	Volunteer	3 Female 1 Male	2 White 2 Coloured
2	Student project leaders	4	Volunteer	3 Female 1 Male	1 Black 3 White
3	Student project leaders	6	Volunteer	4 Female 2 Male	2 Black 3 Coloured 1 White
4	Engineering students	4	Service-learning	3 Female 1 Male	4 White
5	Social Work students (3 rd year)	6	Service-learning	6 Female 0 Male	4 Coloured 2 White
6	Social Work students (4 th year)	5	Service-learning	5 Female 0 Male	5 White
7	Psychology students	6	Service-learning and volunteer	5 Female 1 Male	2 White 2 Black 1 Coloured 1 International
Total		35		29 Female 6 Male	19 White 10 Coloured 5 Black 1 International

Data collection. Seven focus group sessions were conducted, one for each of the respective student cohorts. Focus group discussion was chosen as the data-collection method as it provides a communal space for participants to share common experiences, with less focus on the individual (Barbour, 2007), and it accommodates open-ended discussions within the inductive method, allowing refinement of research questions as the study progresses (Silverman, 2013; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015).

Data analysis. The focus group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. ATLAS.ti (version 7) was used to analyse the data systematically (Friese, 2014). Charmaz's (2006) and Saldaña's (2009) guidelines were followed to process the data, using a four-phase cyclical process for coding. Open coding strategies were used to produce the initial codes, followed by focused coding to categorise and connect the initial codes, involving the most significant and/or frequently occurring initial codes to further sift and categorise the data (Charmaz, 2006). The third phase saw a transition to axial coding, a process of reintegrating data after initial coding and categorising procedures, and aimed at building further categories in accordance with 'when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences' questions and answers concerning the data (Strauss & Corbin, cited in Charmaz, 2014, p. 147) and creating an analytic frame for it. In the last phase memo writing and additional information

(such as researcher observations and field notes) were integrated into the emerging analysis, with the ATLAS.ti programme assisting in accessing and reappraising analytical memos alongside the codes.

Figure 1 Illustrates the data-analysis process with forms and interconnected phases of coding.



Sources: Charmaz (2006; 2011; 2014); Saldaña (2009)

Ethical considerations. Permission for the study was obtained from: (a) Stellenbosch University’s research ethics committee for research in the social sciences for the data-collection period 2012–2014; (b) the division governing research about the university directly involving staff and student participants; and (c) the unit managing CE at the university. Written consent was obtained from participants, who were informed about the aims and procedures, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity measures relating to the study. Participants were informed of the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities, and securing of data with password protection and locked storage in the primary author’s office. Participants were requested to treat the information shared during the group sessions as confidential. There were no immediate risks relating to the topics for discussion, but arrangements were made for referral to the university’s counselling centre in the event of any discomfort arising, with no such referral requested. Instead, students found the focus groups helpful in processing their CE experiences.

FINDINGS

Students indicated not being adequately prepared for terminating the engagement process, especially student volunteers, and particularly after having invested extensive time and energy in the project’s progression, and being affected by the project in personal ways. For some, the endings were abrupt, uncertain, uncontained and generated conflicting emotions.

Issues relating to termination were observed to be particularly intense for the students, and are organised into three overlapping themes, namely: (1) termination as a systematic process; (2) emotional responses to termination; and (3) finding closure.

Termination as a systematic process. This theme focuses on the notion that termination does not happen only on the last day of a project, but progresses over time and is an integral part of the group process (Corey et al., 2014; Yalom, 1985). Students and community participants would benefit from termination being approached systematically rather than left to the last session, merely as exiting. In line with current literature, students mentioned, for example, the usefulness of creating visual and practical reminders of the contact days remaining in a project (Naudé, 2015).

With like children, I'll usually take a calendar so it's like visual.

We'll cross it off ... just that they know that we are leaving..." (Odille, third-year Social Work student)

Such a systematic approach with ending in mind during the engagement processes can mentally prepare students and participants for gradual termination. As indicated below in other excerpts from the group discussion, students did in fact indicate some awareness of a systematic approach to termination.

Riley²: "Usually we tell them 'okay, this week we have so many sessions left'. We prepare them every week and then we also do emotional preparation."

Audrey: "And we also do evaluation so you ask them how they felt about this whole thing and how they feel that we are leaving now."

Odille: "Usually we have like the social work manual so it will have like dates and it will tell you how many days you have in the community or group... so you will do sort of planning. You'll have like ten sessions and then you need two for supervision, two for evaluation, intervention ... I'll probably tell them ... 'listen, I'm only here in the community for this many days ... get their inputs and remind them every week ... Evaluation and termination for me are quite close because then you evaluate what you've done, what you've been through and then the next week terminate with them."

The students are seen to anticipate the end of their engagement as part of the CE process (Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Petersen & Osman, 2013). Odille refers to the Social Work manual, highlighting the intertwining of termination and evaluation, and drawing on theory regarding help with the termination process. Termination is viewed as a continuous process of looking back at engagement sessions, which prepares students to end purposely and in a mindful way with participants. Odille points to the strong relationship formed throughout the engagement, noted as "what you've been through". This reinforces the earlier observation about deep bonds, with engagements extending beyond the completion of academic tasks to sharing of various aspects of the students' and participants' lives in a short or long period (Constandius et al., 2014; Kiely, 2005; Naudé, 2015). Importantly, the students identify that a systematic approach allows for the time and space for them and community participants to accept the impending end of the relationship. As Scarlet notes below "[one] can start to accept that I will not be here anymore, or that person will not be here anymore".

"Like for you guys that have been involved in a project that is maybe only for a year or so, you will have to prepare that child systematically that, 'I will leave in a month's time', 'I will be leaving in three weeks', and 'I will be leaving in two weeks'. So that the learner can start to accept that I will not be here anymore – or that person will not be here anymore." (Scarlet, volunteer project leader)

The discussion above indicates that students feel concern about termination right from the beginning of the engagement process, reinforcing the argument this paper makes for deeper attention and detail for coherent sense-making of the termination process to take place, a need that is evoked in themes two and three. Moreover, volunteers often do not receive structured guidance as service-learning students

² All student names referred to in this article are pseudonyms assigned to the study participants.

do for engagement in communities. For both service-learning students and volunteers the process of termination appears to be reduced to final exiting as indicated in the themes presented next.

Emotional responses to termination. Theme 2 focuses on the notion that termination inevitably evokes feelings of sadness, loss, separation and even abandonment. These emotional responses are characteristic of the ending of meaningful relationships, which in the best of circumstances are difficult to engage with (Alkana, 2006; Corey et al., 2014; Yalom, 1985). Several students in this study, reflecting on leaving a project or community, identified sadness as a prominent emotion. Others indicated frustration, having found difficulty explaining their departure to participants. They note that even knowing the limited span of engagements and making an attempt to exit systematically, termination is nonetheless hard.

“... one guy told me when I was doing this drug support group... ‘Please don’t just come and leave because we get so despondent and then we don’t want to trust anyone’... it’s so difficult to actually explain we can’t be here forever.” (Odille, third-year Social Work student)

Often a sense of abandonment and helplessness over non-contact engagement rules outside programmes linger, as indicated in the student reflections below.

“Sometimes it’s hard to terminate your service because you got attached to that person. Like in my first year, we were working with a client the whole year and I felt so sad because they will never see us again. And they like invited us to a show they had on the farm... and we couldn’t go because we are not allowed to be in contact with them after we terminate.” (Sabrina, third-year Social Work student)

“She told me ‘now is the time that I feel I should just let go of everything... talk to you about everything I feel’; and it was the day I needed to terminate my services. And I was in a state because she wants to speak, it’s stuff she [never] told anybody about... and now she feels like we’ve been through this whole semester... we’ve built a relationship between us and now she wants to speak and she can’t because I’m leaving her. What’s the point of her opening up and I’m never going to see her again... I was devastated because... I felt hopeless... like what’s the point of me doing this when I can’t help because she needed this time... seven weeks just to bond, just to get to know me... and now she wants to explode and I’m not even there for her and how is she ever going to trust somebody else?” (Alegra, third-year Social Work student)

Sabrina described the deep relationship that forms and meaningful sharing that occurs during engagement in her words: “it’s hard to terminate your service because you got attached to that person”, and that evokes feelings of sadness and loss (Corey et al., 2014; Yalom, 1985). Ending a project, moreover, feels like abandoning the participants, as noted in Sabrina’s words: “we just go and they will never see us again”. Alegra’s words “What’s the point of her opening up and I’m never going to see her again” echo a sense of devastation and hopelessness related to the inherently finite nature of the engagement. It was only at the end of the engagement process that her client felt ready to share deeply, which might be seen as an accomplishment on its own, yet for Alegra it felt like she was abandoning the client because this happened on the very last day of the project. She was left feeling anxious that the client might consequently find it difficult to build trust with other people because of this experience. Yet it is possible the client opened up because she knew the engagement was ending and she would not see Alegra again, and the termination itself might have provided the safety she needed to open up. This does not occur to Alegra, which speaks to the need for proper student debriefing; if this experience had been properly addressed in a debriefing session with an experienced counsellor, lecturer or social worker, this possibility might have been pointed out to her, helping to alleviate her anxiety about leaving and abandoning the client.

One student, interestingly, evoked the idea of a “psychological block” with reference to the dynamics involved in project participants forming connections, terminating and starting the process all over again with new volunteers, common occurrences in the context of regular student cycles in CE project

structuring. Difficulties relating to termination were expressed as not limited to students only, but also observed from the side of community participants, as seen in the student reflections below.

“I’m sure the volunteers also get attached to the learners, whoever they are busy with, if it’s Maths or whatever. So, you having to let go, you know, it’s not a nice thing, no one likes to let go. And these faces [volunteers] need to change ... meaning if that person [project participant, e.g. learner] is still in that programme, you need to sort of foster that same level of relationship with someone else. They can maybe be a bit reluctant, because I think it feels like cheating on the previous one.” (Bart, student project leader)

“It’s very difficult when there are some [students] that have been there for longer, that they [the learners] do know and that they trust. And when the new first-year comes in ... they don’t really put in an effort... they feel like they sort of know a couple of you and that’s ok ... it’s very difficult ... to get them [learners] to realize that ... they need to get to know [the new student volunteers] as well.” (Penelope, student project leader)

Again, as Bart observed, the difficulty with termination revolves around the special bond formed between the students and participants, in his words: “no one likes to let go”, and, again, the sense of loss. Bart showed concern for children, in particular, who might experience unease or reluctance about connecting to a new student volunteer who replaces the previous volunteer, possibly evoking in participant-learners a sense of disloyalty to the latter with whom they had bonded. Student anxiety about termination relates here to participants’ possible emotional anxieties relating to relationships in the group stemming from the structuring of CE, which is critically implied. Penelope, making a similar observation, suggested as remedy that the learner-participants be purposely guided to establish fresh relationships by being encouraged to welcome new volunteers at the start of a new project cycle. The above responses imply there has been a degree of failure in the entire engagement as a result of not terminating the process appropriately. This implies students’ anxieties regarding consecutive processes and relationship development in current and future CE projects for both students and participants.

Finding Closure. Theme 3 refers to students’ direct reflection on the process of termination and their anxieties on the possible negative impact of non-closure on their project participants in the future, with the students outlining the conditions that influenced their own experiences of closure. Finding closure was generally observed to be easier when there were succession plans in place, which the students felt reassured them of continued care for the participants beyond their own involvement in the project, and having a sense of their intervention having been successful. These termination imperatives are indicated in the student responses below.

“I can feel at ease that there is someone capable to take care of them the way I would have, or maybe even better. But yes, it is sad because they become part of you.” (Scarlet, student project leader)

“I think it’s also very important to refer them to someone else. Not necessarily saying ‘okay, well you will have a student next year’ because you can’t promise something like that; but you can tell them ‘now that you’ve gotten to trust someone, why don’t you rather just keep on going to your social worker; they know about your background, just keep on going. You don’t need to start from the beginning again’. So it’s important to make sure they have someone to keep on going back to.” (Audrey, third-Year Social work student)

For both Audrey and Scarlet, above, referring participant-clients was an important measure towards achieving a sense of closure, as it eased the uncertainty associated with termination regarding the wellbeing of the participants after the process has ended with them (Corey et al., 2014; Yalom, 1985). Audrey pointed out two important aspects in this regard: firstly, being judicious in promises made to participants about post-termination support; and secondly, encouraging them to use linked established services or organisations as a way of promoting continuity for participants. The issue of continuity is seen as especially important, given the time limit for student involvement in a project. Continuity between the university and the community, itself a contentious topic, was seen to be achievable, to

some extent, by drawing on relationships with established organisations that could serve community members beyond student and university involvement with them.

Finding closure was also influenced by students' perceptions of the success or failure of their engagement. Many alluded to the idea of an underlying sense of uncertainty in the termination process, not only because of the way that termination was approached, but also because of the evaluation process that followed. The reflections below illustrate this.

"You don't know if you have had any impact and if you did, what the impact was. That concerns me also ... even if it's the smallest ... ripple effect or whatever... I'm ... interested to always know exactly..." (Ryan, postgraduate Psychology student volunteer)

"I always think a lot of our success stories, we don't hear about because they happen after we've left. So I think we do better than we think, most of the time. I just don't think we know about it." (Ivy, final-year Social Work student)

"We get the case when it's at its ultimate low and then we leave, before anything actually comes of it." (Amelia, final-year Social Work student)

Ivy, Ryan and Amelia all indicate an intense need to know if their intervention with participants actually made a difference to the latter.

Finding closure was complex for Rose; she was unsure if she had done the right thing or responded to learners in the right way, as indicated below in a conversation extract between her, Velvet (a fellow student) and Blossom (the project leader) regarding a career counselling project they had been involved in together.

Rose: *"Like as far as closure is concerned, I don't feel I had that, you know, I had to stop working with [name of community] because I wanted to work with [name of another community]. And I remember my second to last session, I had a group of ... two boys and two girls coming to me ... I think I had seen them [in] my second session and then again just second to last. And they were just telling me how they had done A, B, C ... and how they were just so grateful, and they wanted my numbers and then I was stuck. I didn't know, should I? Shouldn't I? The boundaries, I just felt it would be a bit too much and it would be an emotional decision if I had said yes. I remember saying 'no, I can't'. But ... I was so sad, I wanted to cry then ... It's always so hard ... even now I can see their faces"*

Velvet: *"Do you feel like you let them down...?"*

Rose: *"I think to a degree, ja. I think maybe I should have given them the numbers and maybe I could have helped more in some way, you know, but I didn't and I wonder how they are, but, ja, I suppose it's ... it's just, it's fine."*

Blossom: *"Because, generally, we don't give numbers, at all."*

Rose: *"That's the thing, ja."*

Blossom: *"At all."*

Rose: *"I remember you emphasising that."* (Rose, Velvet and Blossom, postgraduate Psychology student volunteers)

Rose's opportunity to voice this sense of abandonment and incongruence in a group setting, again points out the need for more spaces where volunteers, in particular, can reflect on the impact that the engagement had on them.

The exchange below between students in a project together shows, again, the actual difficulty of processing and understanding the termination rule of no contact with participants beyond the project duration (also discussed in Theme 2).

Jasmine: *"I got so attached to the children ... And, ja, I couldn't say good-bye to them."*

Ivy: *"It's difficult with kids, though."*

Amelia: *"Ja."*

Jasmine: *“I was like I’m going to come back and visit you ... to see if our tree is still growing that we planted. And then it’s a year later and I haven’t gone back, but I’m not actually allowed to. But I really want to go back; like they’re so cute.”* (Jasmine, Ivy and Amelia, final year Social Work students)

“In terms of like this relationship it shouldn’t be terminated if it was authentic. You start something and you must keep in contact ... if it’s authentic like ... discussed now [about giving] a number Or ... visit[ing] from time to time ... continue being involved even if you’re working or whatever....” (Phineas, student project leader – after-school project)

In the above excerpts Rose, Jasmine and Phineas highlight the issue of boundaries, over which students were generally divided. Some supported further contact with project participants, while others emphasised no further contact after termination. While Jasmine indicated wanting to maintain further contact, she was not able to do this as her life and commitments had actually changed after her service-learning had ended. Rose indicated uncertainty about this boundary, because of the message regarding this from the project leader, which conflicted with her desire to assist the learners further. Phineas maintained that students should find ways to continue the relationship. They reflected no clear understanding on this issue; consistent conditions for continued engagement or terminating without further contact; it appeared that decisions regarding these questions were left to project leaders, specific departments and coordinators of service-learning modules, which created confusion about best practice to achieve closure for them.

Rose’s sense of ambivalence towards closure is noticeable in her self-questioning about doing the right thing or enough: “maybe I could have helped more in some way”. This is also possibly related to her being a Black woman from a similar racial, socio-economic and cultural background as the participants she engaged with, which may have led to her feelings of uncertainty about the counselling for career and life choices she had provided them in the project she was involved in. In that sense, she reflected on her own positionality and proximity to the participants (Berman & Allen, 2012; Constandius et al., 2014; Naudé, 2012).

DISCUSSION

Even though termination is considered part of group processes in disciplines such as psychology and social work, and generally as the last step in CE (Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Petersen & Osman, 2013), the psychological impact on the individual relating to ending relationships was noticed in this study at a South African university as receiving insufficient focus in both local practice modules and CE literature in general. This paper argues that termination should not be treated as simply the exit phase of a project, but an integral part of the CE process as it unfolds from the beginning of an engagement (Theme 1). The often deep connections that develop between students and community participants throughout the engagement process (Constandius et al., 2014; Kiely, 2005; Naudé, 2015), whether over a few interactions in a term or over a whole year, underscores the need to keep in mind that many students find it difficult to let go of these bonds, experiencing a sense of sadness, loss, helplessness and even abandonment upon exiting a project (Theme 2). Although typically associated with the termination of long-term, meaningful relationships or with group therapy settings (Alkana, 2006; Corey *et al.*, 2014; Yalom, 1985), these feelings are present in the CE setting and difficult for students to process on their own and without adequate theoretical and practical guidance, with some students observed to have exited engagements without reaching a sense of closure.

Social Work and Psychology students in this study showed more insight regarding termination as a process, and were also more forcefully articulate in expressing their experiences in comparison to students from other disciplines and volunteers who often have less structured engagement and oversight. However, for both volunteer and service-learning students, it is clear there is insufficient focus in the CE programmes on aspects of personal sense-making or processing of the CE experience at the personal level (Kiely, 2005), despite incorporation of reflection sessions in local curricula, such

sessions being crucial for students to unpack these experiences systematically (Constandius et al., 2014; Wium & Du Plessis, 2016).

Consistent with Naudé (2015), students in this study nonetheless indicated the use of creative methods devised to ease termination, such as small celebrations or the use of visuals, for example, creating countdown calendars to mark off the project days with younger learners (Theme 1). Conducting evaluation exercises was also seen to help reflection on the termination process for both the participants and the students. It is important that evaluation and assessment include a strong focus on the affective aspects and experiences of the engagement, that is, the personalising, processing and connecting elements mentioned in Kiely's (2005) model, and not just on determining whether specific learning outcomes have been achieved (Maistry, 2012).

Anxieties over high leadership turnover in university-based CE projects (Constandius et al., 2014) led to the interesting observation by one student in this study regarding the impact of this on community participants, which he termed a 'psychological block', with reference to learners' possible resistance to incoming students in a project following termination with a student with whom a strong bond had been built (Theme 2). This is an important notion as project leadership and students' involvement in CE programmes are generally of short duration; also, the extent and timelines of their commitment to the programmes might not be communicated clearly and early in the process by student volunteers. The psychological block may therefore be a means that project participants use to protect themselves from a sense of the abandonment they anticipate in future engagements with students. This notion of a psychological block can be linked to the explanation by Corey *et al.* (2014) and Yalom (1985) of the difficulties group members experience with termination of the group process and associated resistance.

It is clear that termination not only concludes the process of engagement, but also lays the foundation for the next engagement experience for both the students (undertaking new projects) and project participants (continuing in the project with new students); more focused attention on this phase is therefore imperative (Corey et al., 2014; Kiely, 2005; Yalom, 1985). Ending the engagement process thoughtfully is likely to encourage student involvement in similar projects in the future, even well beyond their student years. Thus progress is made towards one of the long-term goals of CE – developing socially responsible citizens, especially important in the post-apartheid context of urgent social transformation (Kiely, 2005; Maistry, 2012; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Furthermore, terminating a process with care is likely to also benefit the collaborating community partners in that they may welcome further engagement with the university in the future and on an ongoing basis.

Finding closure (Theme 3) involves meaning making or consolidating experiences when exiting. In this study closure was seen as a "mixed" experience, that is, students left engagements with positive or negative impressions, or a combination of both. Finding closure is linked to processing in Kiely's (2005) model, as the students were seen to engage cognitively with making sense of the experience, also important in group counselling (Yalom, 1985). The students contended that reaching a sense of closure was easier when projects had explicit succession plans in place, which eased their anxieties about abandoning the participants at termination.

Another element influencing closure was students' sense of the impact they had, that is, whether this was lasting and had actually made a difference in participants' lives. This uncertainty relates to the idea that engagement generally benefits the university more than it does the communities (Constandius et al., 2014), which can be perplexing to students at the personal level. On the one hand, they want to feel satisfied they have made a difference in participants' lives, and on the other, that they have achieved their learning outcomes. This does not imply students undertake CE in order to feel better about themselves, but rather that engagement is not just a technical process that does not affect individuals.

Furthermore, in the South African context where students often engage with participants from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (as relates to the contextual border-crossing element in Kiely's (2005) model), it is important for them to reflect on their positionality and proximity to the participants (Berman & Allen, 2012; Constandius *et al.*, 2014; Naudé, 2012). Care taken in ending

processes well can leave students with a sense of satisfaction and appreciate the value of their CE efforts towards the bigger cause of societal transformation, enhancing in turn their general sense of morality and empathy towards others and leading to further such engagements in the future (Berman & Allen, 2012; Brown, 2011; HEQC, 2006; Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slamat, 2008; Thomson et al., 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

This article emphasises the need for termination to be considered an integral part of the CE process from the outset of engagement in a project. Termination evokes strong emotional responses from both students and community participants, which can influence further engagement in negative and positive ways. Students and participants finding closure with each other at the end of a CE process is as important as reaching all other learning outcomes and project goals. How participants terminate the engagement process may shape further involvement in CE activities in their personal and professional lives beyond the university; this applies particularly to Social Work and Psychology students, who will likely face similar situations of a finite nature throughout their career. For engineering students not exposed to social issues through study in the way that humanities and social science students are, ending the engagement process with care will assist in reaching a deeper understanding of the development context in which they provide services. Effective termination is especially vital considering the overarching aim of CE is to help develop an engaged and responsible post-apartheid citizenry. This is urgent in the South African context, which is still divided along racial and cultural lines; all aspects of relationships in cross-cultural engagement must take place effectively to have positive outcomes for the different parties involved.

This starts with purposely integrating from the onset of a project the emotional care component into service-learning modules and volunteer programmes in institutional curricula through reflective practices. Reflective practices should be critically oriented, increasing students' ability to engage with issues of power and positionality for their holistic development. Where such reflection practice is already in place (as in some service-learning and social work practice modules, but not necessarily in volunteer programmes), the emphasis should be equally placed on reaching project outcomes and all aspects of personal processing. Preparation for termination should aim to consolidate both academic learning and visceral impacts on students from the beginning of a project. To better enable students to reach a sense of closure at the end of a CE engagement and ameliorating their anxieties about abandoning their participants with whom they form strong bonds, succession plans should be put in place in projects. Where possible, links should be also encouraged with community organisations to provide continuity for community participants beyond termination with students.

Lastly, students should be provided with adequate opportunity to reflect on the impact of their service on participants, possibly undertaken with participants at project locations and in classroom-based sessions facilitated by lecturers in service-learning programmes and overseers of student-led volunteer projects. Future research should consider in-depth reflection approaches effective for the South African context, especially relating to cross-cultural engagement. This will provide guidance for service-learning and social practice staff at universities and overseers of student led projects, together with student project leaders, about how best to guide and provide protected yet challenging spaces for students to learn in and grow holistically. Additionally, these insights should also inform education policies to provide clear directives on ending engagement processes conscientiously, which is important for universities and other higher education institutions that are positioned to assist with societal transformation through CE as an integral part of their teaching, learning and research. Effectively improving the engagement process in the local CE context is an achievable goal that should be prioritised, including holistic termination and putting in place continuity measures to enhance the wellbeing of students and community participants and strengthen relationships between education institutions providing CE and communities, who together can work more effectively for social transformation in the post-apartheid context.

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