CHALLENGING THE "APARTHEIDS" OF KNOWLEDGE

in Higher Education through Social Innovation

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Chapter 1

How to determine the role of community engagement in student development: Formulating a research project proposal to answer this question

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1. Context and introduction

Although anecdotal evidence is easily found, little research has been done on the role of CE in student development in the context of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, with a particular focus on the role of student volunteerism. This chapter presents a research project proposal developed by the coordinator of the volunteering programme (the Engaged Citizen Programme) at an HEI in the Eastern Cape in an attempt to answer important questions and to document the journey that culminated in this project proposal. Taking into consideration that this volunteering programme takes place at an HEI, Rhodes University, the relationship between CE and higher education is the starting point of this discussion.

HEIs play an important intellectual role in, and are important economic resources to, their communities. In line with the growing recognition of the importance of investing in community building (Gugerty & Swezey, 1996), the White Paper of Higher Education Transformation (1997) saw fit to make CE part of the

HEIs' agenda (Bengu, 1997). This has led to HEIs moving away from the concept of an 'ivory tower' and becoming more socially responsive and involved in their communities. The communities that HEIs exist in provide a rich learning environment for students, as well as an opportunity to contribute to community development (Gugerty & Swezey, 1996). CE in South African HE has shifted from being defined as one of the three pillars alongside teaching and research, to being seen as integrated within the broader projects of teaching and research (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slamati, 2008). This shift has allowed for "a deeper sense of context, locality and application" (Lazarus, *et al.*, 2008, p. 62). D. Hornby, the Director of the Community Engagement Division of Rhodes University, notes that the aim at Rhodes University is to infuse CE across the university (personal communication, January 5, 2016), supporting the recommendation that it should be "institutionally embedded and cross cutting with teaching and research" (Preece, 2013a, p. 270).

CE can be defined as the process of using teaching, learning and research to build and exchange knowledge, skills, resources and expertise in "mutually beneficial relationships with communities" (Petersen & Osman, 2013, p. 4). It is typically expressed in a variety of forms, ranging from credit bearing service-learning academic programmes to non-credit bearing volunteer activities. Service-learning, as a form of CE, combines academic studies with service in communities, while volunteerism is the process of student engagement in community activities that are of a social and educational nature (Petersen & Osman, 2013). CE can also be defined as a process of bringing together different and often multiple stakeholders to build relationships in collaborative ways, with the ultimate goal of improving the collective wellbeing of all (Maurrasse, 2010).

Globally, in the past decade, there has been a paradigm shift in the way in which universities are positioning their work with communities. Whereas CE activities were formerly seen as extra-curricular activities, there has been a growing recognition that they should form a core part of institutional goals. UNESCO (2009, as cited in Preece, 2013a, p. 266) states that HE "should create mutually beneficial partnerships with communities and civil societies to facilitate the sharing and transmission of appropriate knowledge". These activities have shifted from a perspective of philanthropy to one of collaboration (Preece, 2013b).

A university that is engaged is described as one that is committed to producing graduates who are critically involved and are able to "link knowledge to the public good through engaged scholarship" (Netshandama, 2010, p. 354). This emphasises civic responsibility and the enhancement of students' learning. Graduating students need to be equipped to excel in a diverse, unequal and

complex society. Being involved in CE activities gives students an experience that promotes their learning and personal development and helps them to engage in critical reflective thinking that enhances their social responsibility (Phelps & Dostilio, 2008). CE heightens students' knowledge and understanding of their local communities. It also develops students' "skills, disposition, and habits to work with others in a democratic way towards the common good" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2010, p. 413). Students develop the capacity to be global citizens who contribute to the common good (Carolissen *et al.*, 2010). Outcomes for students who participate in CE include self-reported gains in civic responsibility, life skills and academic development (Bringle & Hatcher, 2010). Gugerty and Swezey (1996) propose that CE activities, as learning opportunities for students, should be as follows:

1. The location of the activities should be based in the local community.
2. Students' interactions with community partners must be based on mutual goals and democratic processes, forming reciprocal relationships.
3. The activities should include structured reflection sessions.

The ECP has been designed to include these three elements in the following ways. First, the majority of the CE activities at Rhodes University are based in the broader Makhanda community. In particular, this programme is based in diverse parts of the local community. Second, within the programme, an annual strategic planning session is held with all community partners, where the goals for the year are set and outlined. There is an emphasis on the building of mutually beneficial relationships between community partners and student volunteers. Third, each quarter all student volunteers and community partners who are part of the ECP engage in reflection sessions. For CE to be educational for students, students should be challenged to continuously reflect on their engagement. Asking community partners to facilitate and/or participate in these reflection sessions legitimises their role as educators in the learning process (Gugerty & Swezey, 1996).

There are four critical elements that lend themselves to thoughtful CE. These are:

- Orientation and training: They are important first steps in CE for both community partners and students. It is important to provide sufficient information from the onset about the terms of engagement.
- Community voice: The incorporation of the community's perspective is essential in building bridges, making changes, solving problems and combating exploitation or differing expectations, etc.

- Meaningful action: All engagement needs to be necessary and of value to both the community partner and the students.
- Reflection: This is a crucial component of CE, as it places the experiences into a broader context (Mintz & Hesser, 1996).

These four critical elements are evident in CE activities at Rhodes University, as outlined in the programme details discussed in the following sections.

2. The Engaged Citizen Programme (ECP)

The ECP is the biggest volunteerism programme currently running at Rhodes University, with over 300 students registered as active volunteers at 27 community partner organisations in Makhanda. Community partner organisations are grouped into the following categories:

1. Arts and alternative education: Students in these organisations engage in extra-curricular education-related activities, including (but not limited to) art, drama, music and computer literacy projects. These projects require creative engagement with extra-curricular activities, bridging academic and creative skills.
2. High school tutoring and mentoring: Students work with high school learners, providing academic tutoring and/or mentoring. Students who sign up to be academic tutors need to attend a mandatory course on tutoring at the beginning of the year. This is a certified National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 4 short course that is offered through the Rhodes University Education Faculty.
3. Literacy and homework: Students in these organisations typically work with learners who are in primary school. They engage in literacy programmes such as homework clubs and reading clubs. Students who sign up to volunteer in reading clubs need to attend a mandatory course on reading club orientation at the beginning of the year. This is a certified NQF level 5 short course that is offered through the Rhodes University Department of Literary Studies in English.
4. Support: Students volunteer in organisations such as old age homes, shelters and orphanages.

Community partner organisations register as part of the ECP with the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Division each year by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This MOU outlines what the rights and responsibilities of both RUCE and the community partner are. Community

partner organisations appoint a volunteer manager each year who works closely with RUCE in coordinating the programme in what RUCE terms a co-management process. This co-management process entails RUCE working closely with the volunteer manager in jointly planning, executing and evaluating any CE activities in which they are jointly involved as part of this programme. Whereas RUCE assumes the overall responsibility for training all student volunteers each year before they commence with their volunteer activities, volunteer managers are invited to form part of the training by facilitating some of the sessions. Additionally, volunteer managers, as part of the training, run a community partner fair where they recruit potential volunteers, informing them about their organisations and what they would be expected to do at the organisations should they choose to volunteer there. The volunteer manager is also responsible for orientating student volunteers and facilitating volunteer activities at their organisations. Additionally, they assume the responsibility of organising any additional organisation-specific training that they feel will be beneficial for their student volunteers.

Mandatory annual training is provided to all students who wish to participate in the programme. All students, regardless of whether they have volunteered previously, attend the training should they wish to participate in the programme in that given year. The training is an orientation towards the principles of CE at Rhodes University, as outlined below, and includes theoretical concepts. First time volunteers receive different training to that offered to repeat volunteers. Student leaders (senior volunteers who take on leadership roles within the programme) receive further practical training in leadership skills. Additionally, RUCE has partnered with faculties and departments at Rhodes University to run short courses for certain groups of volunteers. The Education Faculty runs a tutoring short course for all students who wish to tutor, whereas the Departments of Education and Literary Studies in English run a reading club orientation short course for all students who wish to volunteer in reading clubs. Both of these short courses are accredited by Rhodes University and are pitched at NQF level 4 and NQF level 5 respectively. They are mandatory for all volunteers who wish to work in these respective fields and are completed annually, once-off. The School of Languages and Literatures also offers a short course on basic isiXhosa conversational skills for all student volunteers who wish to learn the language. This short course is South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) registered at the Adult Basic Education and Training Level 1. While this course is not mandatory, many student volunteers register for it and have found it beneficial for their volunteer activities.

After the signing of the MOU each year, volunteer managers attend an annual strategic planning session with RUCE where the goals for the year are set. Halfway through the year, a mid-year review is held where RUCE and volunteer managers jointly assess progress on set goals. An end of year review is also held annually. Additionally, at the end of each quarter volunteer managers co-facilitate, with their student leaders, team meetings with their groups of student volunteers where they reflect on progress and tackle problems that might have arisen. Student leaders are experienced student volunteers who have previous volunteer experience and have demonstrated leadership abilities. They are selected annually to work closely with volunteer managers and the coordinator of the ECP in managing small teams of student volunteers. RUCE has appointed two dedicated staff members who coordinate the programme, a coordinator of the ECP, as well as a Community Partner Liaison. Whereas the coordinator of the ECP works closely with student volunteers and manages the small team of student leaders, the Community Partner Liaison works closely with the volunteer managers throughout the year.

An asset-based approach to CE recognises that all communities have assets, whether they may be "natural environment resources, or human skills and knowledge" (Preece, 2013a, p. 990). The principles and the approach used by RUCE include:

- mutuality, which means that all CE activities are mutually beneficial for all parties involved;
- working from a strategic model of engagement, which entails recognising your own assets as well as that of others; and
- joint learning, action and reflection.

The goal of CE is thus "to build on existing assets in order to construct a resource-led foundation for development which is controlled by the community rather than external agents" (Preece, 2013b, p. 990). Effective engagement with communities leads to relationships that are mutually beneficial in nature, and shared responsibility develops amongst all stakeholders (Netshanadama, 2010).

All student volunteers and volunteer managers who have actively participated in the programme annually receive a certificate of participation at an award ceremony. Active participation entails attending a minimum of 80% of volunteer activities throughout the year. These volunteer activities include attending the mandatory training at the beginning of the year, volunteering weekly for a minimum of an hour during term time and attending the quarterly reflection team

meetings. Additionally, for student leaders and volunteer managers this includes submitting the quarterly written reports.

There are also special awards that are given at the award ceremony, and while a majority of the award recipients are part of the ECP, a few of them are also involved in other CE activities at Rhodes University. One is either nominated to receive an award or must apply for it. These award categories include:

- Student volunteer of the year: This is a student who does exceptionally well in their volunteering, going over and above the minimum requirements. They devote an immense amount of energy to creating sustainable relationships with their community partner organisation. This student demonstrates a deep understanding of the principles of CE at Rhodes University. They show dedication, creativity and leadership initiative.
- Community partner of the year: This is a community partner who builds mutually beneficial and sustainable relationships with all their student volunteers. They collaborate well with student volunteers and RUCE. This partner makes a notable impact on their target community through using CE principles.
- Society/sports group of the year: This award goes to a student society group or a sports club that has made a valuable contribution in the Makhanda community through the use of the CE principles. They partner with an organisation in the local community to make a notable impact.
- Hall/residence of the year: This award goes to a hall or residence that has built a solid partnership with a community partner. They must demonstrate collegiality and collaboration, working on well-focused, organised CE activities with their community partner.
- Student researcher of the year: The recipient of this award is a student or a group of students who bridge the gap between academia and community development. Their research is mutually beneficial and contributes to the body of knowledge that informs CE practices.

It is hoped that student volunteers who actively participate in the ECP are able to demonstrate that they meet the following three goals by the end of their volunteer activities:

1. understand the socio-economic context and how it limits or advances life opportunities;
2. become socially active, contributing to community development in Makhanda; and
3. build meaningful relationships with a diverse range of people.

Having outlined in detail what the ECP is and how it presents a robust and structured volunteerism programme, the next section moves to the research question at the heart of the proposal I have developed to better understand the developmental role of the ECP. In sharing this proposal, I hope to outline how my thinking has been influenced by my practice and context and to provide guidelines on how to build these type of proposals.

3. Research questions

In an interview about CE, Dr Sizwe Mabizela, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, stated: "Every student who has had the opportunity to participate in community engagement is very, very grateful for the opportunity. And, you can really see young people who have participated in these activities, they are qualitatively different" (S. Mabizela personal communication, July 2015). This prompted me to question what it actually means for one to be 'qualitatively different'. What developmental process in the CE learning context would lead to a qualitative difference in persons?

I was struck by anecdotal evidence from past students who have been actively involved in the programme and feel that it has made a difference in their lives. One particular example involving a former student volunteer and student leader, Esihle Matshaya, stood out to me. She said: "Because you took a chance on me and made me a student leader way back then I found my true love. I am doing quite a bit in the CSI sphere (won't go into detail because God deserves the credit not me), my thesis will involve the love you introduced me to and I have come to the realisation that I am actually a developmental journalist. Guys, this woman works *pha kwi* [there at] community engagement offices. Please sign up and volunteer, the structures they have in place are phenomenal. I literally survived depression in third year and managed to pass because [of] RUCE office and Benita's hard work!" (E. Matshaya personal communication, June 1, 2018).

What both Dr Mabizela and Esihle say is that being actively involved in CE activities can make a difference in one's life. I decided to continue my studies and narrow in on the following research questions: "What do students understand the role of CE to be, and does this understanding change over time as students engage in community engagement activities?" Further research questions are: "What are students' understanding of 'engagement', a 'community' and their role in society?" and "What skills and knowledge do students gain from participating in community engagement activities?" The main aim of these research questions are to provide a space to reflect on the impact active involvement in CE activities

makes on student development, and in particular, how the structure of the ECP provides an enabling space for this development to occur.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data collection

In order to answer my questions, the three goals of the ECP will be measured in various ways. Firstly, a pre- and post-test, in the form of a questionnaire, are used to find out what the students know about the principles of CE before they undergo training. This questionnaire is also used to check if there is any new learning at the end of the student's volunteering activities and is thus re-administered at the end of the student's volunteer activities. The questionnaire asks questions in relation to what the student is doing in their volunteer space, as well as what they understand the CE principles to be. The following four questions are included in this questionnaire:

1. What do you understand community engagement to be? What principles underpin it?
2. What role, if any, do you believe you have to play in community engagement?
3. What do you hope to gain from participating in community engagement activities? OR: What have you gained from participating in community engagement activities?
4. What role, if any, do you feel community partners have to play in your development? OR: Do you believe community partners have played a role in your development? Explain your answer.

Secondly, the student's attendance record will be tracked to check whether they are complying with the requirements of the programme. An assumption is made that if students participate fully in the programme, they learn more. Thus, a correlation will be made between participation and learning.

Thirdly, at the end of each quarter students will be asked to engage in a variety of reflection tasks, in addition to attending reflection team meetings with their community partners and student leaders. In the first and last quarter students will be asked to engage with the "Wedding Ring" model (**Figure 1**) (Talbot, 2016). In the second quarter they will answer a series of questions from a guided reflection task, and in the third quarter they will engage in a group reflection task. I outline what each of these entail below.

Figure 1: The "Wedding Ring" model

This model is based on the Russian wedding rings, which are made up of three different bands of gold that are bound together. Talbot (2016) proposed using this as a way of understanding CE, particularly at Rhodes University, as CE is centred around relationships. Talbot (2016) explains that while this reflects her own experience as a volunteer in CE, many students and community partners go through the same motions in developing their relationships. Thus, this model is used as a metaphor to express the experience and learning that occurs as one engages in volunteer activities. Each experience is built on from the previous experience, thus demonstrating that learning takes place. The three different bands represent the three different stages of the relationship-building process. The first band, the rose gold band, is regarded as the first stage, while the second band, the white gold band, is regarded as the second stage. The third band, the yellow gold band, is regarded as the third and final stage and also the ultimate goal. Moving through the various stages is not a linear process, as it is influenced

by many factors. It is also important to note that as students move through the various stages, so do partners. Sometimes one might stay at one stage for a very long time; it is all part of a process (Talbot, 2016).

Stage one, the rose gold band, is the introduction of the relationship. This is where students visit the community partner organisation for the first time and are excited to learn about what the partner does, orientation occurs and there is goal setting between the community partner and the student volunteer. Usually there is a lot of emphasis on what the individual can do and very minimal emphasis on joint learning at this stage. In stage two, the white gold band, the relationship between the student volunteer and the community partner is solidified. Usually, student leaders are involved in this stage, where responsibility between student volunteers and community partners is negotiated and shared and joint learning begins to occur. Insight into the overarching RUCE goals is still limited at this stage, however, with much emphasis being on that particular partner relationship. Stage three, the final stage, which is the yellow gold band, is the ultimate goal of CE. At this stage, community partners and student volunteers are completely comfortable with learning from each other and equally contribute to their jointly set goals. Student volunteers feel that they are a part of the community and/or organisation that they volunteer in, and community partners feel that they are equal partners in the CE process. There is a complete understanding of the principles and practice of CE, and successes of the partner relationship are attributed not to individual effort, but to team effort (Talbot, 2016).

Based on this understanding of the wedding ring model, students will be asked to reflect by answering the questions below. In term 1 they will be asked the following questions:

1. Which stage of the wedding band do you feel you are in?
2. What were you expected to do when you arrived at your community partner each week?
3. What new knowledge do you hope to gain about your community partner?
4. Do you have some goals for the year ahead?

In term 4 they will be asked the following questions:

1. Which stage of the wedding band do you feel you are in? Has this changed since term 1? If yes, please explain how.
2. Did you see what you expected to see when you arrived at your community partner each week?
3. Have you gained new knowledge about your community partner?
4. Have you been able to link your volunteer experience to your own reality?

- 5. Have you been able to realise your reason for doing the activities? OR: Do you feel there is purpose to your volunteering?
- 6. From what you have observed, have you been able to make judgements that will help you progress?
- 7. Do you feel your opinions/goals have changed now that you have more knowledge of the ECP experience?

4.1.1 GUIDED REFLECTION TASK

These are the questions that student volunteers will be asked to engage with in term 2:

- 1. Expectations
 - a. What did you expect to learn?
 - b. What did you expect to experience?
 - c. What were your preconceived ideas ...
 - i. ... about your community partner?
 - ii. ... about the other volunteers?
 - iii. ... about what would happen?
- 2. Observation of activities
 - a. What observations did you make about yourself?
 - i. Your kind of interactions?
 - ii. Your thoughts and feelings?
 - iii. Your interactions with your peers?
 - iv. Your interactions with your community partner?
 - v. How were other people feeling? Why?
 - vi. Any adjustments you wish to make/have made based on what has happened?
 - 1. How have these worked?
- 3. Reflecting on your learning
 - a. What have you learned?
 - b. What do you think your community partner has learned?
- 4. Relate this volunteer experience back to fundamental lessons from your training.

4.1.2 INTERACTIVE REFLECTION

In the reflection to be done in term 3, each person will choose and cut out headlines or pictures from newspapers or magazines that relate to their current situation or plans at their community partner organisations. The collection can either be a collage or in a table format, such as a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses,

Opportunities, Threats) analysis. They need to share with the group why they chose it. Questions to guide image collections are:

- 1.1 What key strengths exist at your community partner site and within your group?
- 1.2 How might you use these strengths effectively?
- 2.1 What key challenges exist at your community partner site and within your group?
- 2.2 Using the asset-based approach to community development, how might you address these challenges?

What key opportunities exist at your community partner site and within your group?

- 1.1 How might you maximise on these opportunities effectively?
- 1.2 What key threats exist at your community partner site and within your group?
- 1.3 Using the asset-based approach to community development, how might you address these threats?

OR

Students will be asked to take one headline or photo that they are really drawn to or taken aback by. This headline will be as local as possible, although not necessarily recent, and relevant to issues being dealt with by volunteers. In small group, students must ask each other:

- 1. Why did you choose that headline (tell the story of how it links/is pertinent to your site)?
- 2. Is there a pressing issue at your site?
- 3. Do you think this is an isolated issue, or are other sites experiencing it?
- 4. Who is it affecting?
- 5. What opportunities/duty bearers/stakeholders are there to help overcome it?
- 6. Does the site/student volunteers/student leaders/volunteer managers have the capacity and resources to plan a way forward?

4.2 Data analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the transcribed data and to identify themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). This process "interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). The six steps described by Braun and

Clark (2006) will be followed. To summarise, these authors state that the process involves "familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 87). NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, will be used to arrange and track findings of this research and to manage the volume of the transcribed data and conceptualise it (Creswell, 2007).

5. Ethical considerations

This research will adhere to a code of ethics. Participants will give informed consent for participating in this research. This means that they will be made fully aware of what the entire research process entails and will be asked to sign a consent form before the data collection process starts. Should students not be willing to give consent, they will still be required to adhere to the programme specifications; however, their reflections will not form part of the research process. Students will be asked to include their student numbers on all their reflections in order to identify them when tracking their personal development during the analysis process. The student numbers will, however, be treated confidentially, with myself as the principal researcher being the only person who has access to them. Additionally, all students will be given pseudonyms in all publications. Participation in this research will be voluntary, with all participants being high functioning adults who are 18 years or older.

As the principal researcher, I will respect the autonomy and welfare of all participants. This means participants will have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. In the process of asking for informed consent, I have disclosed all potential risks to participants, which include distress caused by being triggered by a question during reflections. This, however, is unlikely. Should participants find themselves in distress, I will advise that they discontinue the research process and advise them to seek further professional assistance. I have also informed participants of the potential benefits of participating in the research, which include that they could be provided with a space for reflection and tracking their personal development through CE. As the principal researcher, I will endeavour to be transparent at all times with the participants, not only declaring what the research will be used for but also giving them access to the research findings. I will also use a process of reflexivity in order to guard against the influence of prior beliefs or assumptions that I might have as I have been involved in the programme for a number of years, first as a student volunteer and student leader, and subsequently as the coordinator of the programme (Neuman, 1997).

6. Conclusion

While this research is still in its early stages and it may be too soon to share some results, anecdotal evidence does seem to suggest that students who participate in CE activities, such as the ECP, are, as Dr Mabizela says, "qualitatively different". It is hoped that this research will shed some light on the factors that enable student development in participants in CE. This will inform the future development of the programme, which could eventually serve as a model that other HEIs can use in their own contexts, with recommendations on how volunteer programmes can be structured in order to promote student learning and development. The aim is also to shed more light on the important role that community partners play in facilitating student learning and development, and how their role is promoted through the co-management model of CE activities that RUCE proposes.

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