Executive Summary

This CESL2 action research project is an UTLO and NRF funded study which took place during 2013. It addressed the challenge of how to address the competing goals and values of student service learning course requirements and those of community organisations in order to enhance university contributions to local development needs. It was conducted on the Pietermaritzburg campus. Eight case studies of engagement projects began with stakeholder consultations followed by implementation and evaluation of the case studies over a period of 12 months.

The project responded to global interest in making higher education more responsive to development needs, national priorities for developing responsible citizens and institutional priorities for 'responsible community engagement'.

It took a community development approach which applied asset based development theory (supporting communities to build on their own assets to solve local problems) with the concept of adaptive leadership (being sensitive to context and encouraging communities to take responsibility for decision making) with a view to building trust and contributing to community empowerment.

Learning from the engagement

The study found that students and community members were able to learn from each other, contributing to new knowledge, skills and understandings but that the timeframe for service learning militates against the CESL relationship.

It found that clarification of competing goals and values prior to the service learning placements enhanced the community relationship but there is a need for ongoing feedback and monitoring to accommodate shifting goals and priorities during project implementation.

Grass roots communities were motivated by the interest the university showed in their activities.

The scholarship of community engagement

The CESL2 project builds on a smaller project conducted in 2012 (CESL). This study is a partnership between the University of the Free State and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The findings have resulted in presentations at one international and two local conferences. Journal articles will be submitted for review in 2014.

Key Policy Messages

Universities need to re-think how service learning (SL) is organised for the purposes of 'responsible engagement'. The following recommendations are:

- Establish an infrastructure for CE in the University for funding & matching courses to community led initiatives
- Dedicated CE staff should be allocated to facilitate CE and SL within colleges
- Organisations should engage directly with staff & students prior to the placement
- SL placements should operate as 'block internships' on similar lines to teaching practice placements
- Feedback loops should be built into the SL timetable
- Quality SL &/or CE should be factored into staff performance ratings

Key Research Findings

- Community ownership of the engagement task is essential
- Students working together on a task enhances understanding of teamwork and power dynamics
- Community led engagement contributes to co-creation of knowledge
- Community-led meetings with students prior to SL placement enhances the engagement relationship
- SL projects work best when matched with student disciplinary expertise
- Communities require sustained university involvement to maximise learning and development
- CE with SL demands extensive preparation
Policy context for community engagement and service learning

The Government White Paper on the transformation of higher education states that one of the goals of higher education is to ‘promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes’ (Department of Education 1997: 10). In June 2004 the HEQC released its Criteria for Institutional Audits, including criteria on service-learning (Criterion 7) and community engagement (Criterion 18).

Goal 2 of the UKZN’s Strategic Plan 2007-2016, refers to Responsible Community Engagement which is designed to ‘contribute through knowledge to the prosperity and sustainability of our province, and to nation-building, by connecting with and committing ourselves to the communities we serve in a manner that adds value and earns their respect, admiration and trust’.

The College of Humanities Strategic Plan Goal 2 is ‘to promote responsible community engagement in the College of Humanities’. This includes building: ‘research and scholarship around CE through collaborative research projects with a dynamic link to communities within disciplines and across schools’ (p.8).

The CESL2 project aimed to investigate ways in which service learning can more effectively address community identified needs. ‘Community’ in the CE context is interpreted broadly to include NGOs, organised social groups and geographical locations.

1. What is the nature and understanding of existing SL and CE among academics?
2. How can an ‘adaptive leadership’ approach enhance the engagement partnership?
3. To what extent does a multidisciplinary approach improve the engagement activity?
4. What can we learn from the experiences from the viewpoints of all stakeholders?

The research methodology

CESL2 followed a 4 phase, qualitative, action research approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROJECT ACTIVITY</th>
<th>COMMUNITY MEMBERS</th>
<th>STUDENTS &amp; COURSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>devising corporate communication strategies for disability advocacy NGO</td>
<td>NGO staff (2), academic staff member</td>
<td>Media Studies Honours course (12 students) Education &amp; Development SL course – 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>establishing organic garden in consultation with one student residence to combat student hunger</td>
<td>Academic staff member</td>
<td>Education &amp; Development SL course – 3 students Politics and Policy SL course – 2 students</td>
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<tr>
<td>(gender and sexuality training with a view to facilitating workshops for community organisations)</td>
<td>NGO staff (2) alongside other participating community trainees</td>
<td>Education &amp; Development SL course – 5 students Politics and Policy SL course – 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[English language classes for community counsellors]</td>
<td>NGO liaison officer and 16 community counsellors</td>
<td>Education &amp; Development SL course – 8 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[facilitating early child development activities for young carers in rural township]</td>
<td>Community college contact; 1 locally employed child development facilitator &amp; 1 supervisor, 2 parents</td>
<td>Education &amp; Development SL course – 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[assisting with implementing new monitoring and evaluation framework for national reading club project in rural area]</td>
<td>Cape Town based NGO trainer, Local NGO coordinator, 6 reading club facilitators, 1 area reading club supervisor</td>
<td>Education &amp; Development SL course – 1 student Policy Development M &amp; E Masters course – 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[archiving video footage in PMB office]</td>
<td>NGO manager and 1 administrator</td>
<td>Library and Information Studies – 2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[assisting film makers with translating and communicating with people about their hunger experiences]</td>
<td>NGO manager, film crew</td>
<td>Politics and Policy SL course – 2 students</td>
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Community agencies were then asked to identify projects that could be completed by two or more students working together over a period of two months.

The projects would have to fit into student timetable constraints and students were encouraged to work together from more than one discipline.

Community agencies then met students to discuss what each hoped to gain from the partnership.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION
Community engagement with service learning requires long term collaboration, coordination and planning with all relevant agency members, staff and students
The case study findings

Theme: power relationships

What I learned was the facilitators they take this job very seriously, it is kinda like it's their baby and if someone else from the outside tries to intrude somewhere... you are attacking them personally so... if you want to intervene... do it in a way that... does not seem as if you are attacking them, in a way that we are here to learn (student in early child development project)

I can say that we have benefitted a lot because the presence of someone outside the programme especially the university makes every worker be at their best... the reading clubs that have been visited have become more alert and motivated compared to those that the students have not visited... also... the attendance of the clubs has increase because they know students from the varsity will arrive (reading club site manager)

We learned to pace all our knowledge and adapt to the capacity of the organisation that we were working with... so it taught us to hold back and only give what they can use (media Studies student)

Theme: working together

Being on time... if I'm late for myself [OK] but then if I'm late and someone else is waiting for me it's a big deal and it's not OK. I think working in teams did benefit us a lot because once you go to the workplace we have to learn to work with other people (student giving English lessons to counsellors)

There were no challenges because we worked well together. If you said you are coming we would make sure we avail ourselves and await your arrival. I would even go with you to check if my co-workers are at work and are they doing their work properly so that you can find what you needed (reading club facilitator)

We had different ideas and worked in a good partnership... we used to discuss things; agree that they can take over now. They would tell the story they prepared and I would also tell some of their stories that they've told (early child development community facilitator)

The students got to realise... we are not always in the office... you cannot always get hold of the people you want when you want and you have to adjust and not do things at the last minute (Disability advocacy NGO)

Theme: knowledge sharing and co-creation

I learnt more about sexuality and gender more than I ever knew... I think it really changed, shifted my mind set... it taught me a lot about the words we use so much for granted without knowing what they mean (student in gender and sexuality NGO)

The students themselves, because they sometimes suffer the same issues... they helped to bring also another dimension of understanding of food insecurity... they also said things which was quite interesting... it enriched the script because originally we weren't going to think about universities... they enriched the process through their thinking (Film making NGO coordinator)

They [reading club facilitators] also picked up a few lessons from the students... working with other people is nice, sharing ideas... we love things like this, to be able to learn how we can improve our work (reading club facilitator)

It has been interesting to have people outside the disability field looking at what they think should be in the brochure that we might not think of... so it's quite nice getting the outsider's view (Disability advocacy NGO)

We learned things that we usually wouldn't learn. We learned a lot of things in media like... just colour and how important it is, in that we could use a dark blue or this blue (Education student in Media Studies group)

Theme: communication

What I have experienced so far is... the respect between the two, the sharing of information... when we were not happy about something we said it upfront and they responded; everything was clear in terms of the process (Archiving NGO contact)

We were left to do everything our selves. I know it's a bit childish to say but I think we needed a little bit of guidance and direction (student giving English lessons to counselors)

The only challenge in communication was when we had to find out when we were going for workshops; it kind of clashed with everything because... the exams were coming so it was a hassle with communication because we couldn't reach xxxx (student in gender and sexuality NGO)

The things that were agreed on were those that were implemented... When things needed to be done emails were sent explaining what it is and why it needs to be done (Archiving NGO contact)

KEY FINDING

Communication must be open and clear and understandings established at the project outset

KEY FINDING

If power differentials are managed sensitively they can also have a positive and motivating impact at grass roots level
Challenges

**Missing feedback loop**
I expected you to correct me when I was teaching in front of the children and say that now here you are wrong and here you are doing well (reading club facilitator).

One of my expectations is feedback [from the NGO] because it completes the cycle to let you know that you are on the right track (media studies student).

It was a concern for me that I was not asked to give any feedback on student performance during the service learning project (garden project facilitator).

**Timetable issues**
If we are going to schedule workshops they must come with their timetables because you do not want to say let’s schedule for this date and then they say we are definitely coming ... and then all of a sudden oh no I can’t miss this lecture (NGO).

It seemed like our service learning is a separate project from our reports ... we had to produce a report before we were even done with the whole service learning project (student).

Create them more like internships, instead of service learning ... and starting them earlier in the year so that by the time the student is being taught ... they are actually doing practicals on what they were [taught] at the university (Student).

The sad part is that this programme is for six weeks only (NGO).

**POLICY RECOMMENDATION**
SL placements should operate as block internships so that sufficient time is available for the engagement activity.

Conclusions

Community-led engagement through service learning has the potential to contribute to co-creation of knowledge and provide mutual benefits for all participants.

But the timetable constraints of service learning works against the development potential of engagement activities.

Successful projects require considerable preparatory work and ongoing monitoring by key staff within communities and the University.

Furthermore, in order to maximize understandings about, and learn from the engagement experience, arrangements should be built into the projects to enable all parties to feedback their concerns and recommendations for improvement.

References


The research teams

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