Rationales for engaged scholarship projects in one college at a distance institution

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to explore engaged scholarship project leaders' rationales for starting their engaged scholarship project in communities. Community engagement (or engaged scholarship) has become a required part of the academia and increasingly becoming a scholarly endeavor. Academics in the education faculty at one university in South Africa were asked to voluntarily participate in a study exploring their rationales for starting their engaged scholarship projects. Semi-structured interviews were held with project leaders. Responses indicated four factors in rationales, firstly, the context selected for project were closely linked to project leader's early experiences in education, secondly, project leaders selected subjects that were known for being problematic to teach, thirdly, the challenges within the context motivated project leaders to become involved and lastly, project leaders indicated that their motivation to remain involved in the project stemmed from wanting to develop the project further. The study was limited to project leaders in one faculty and only focused on rationales. Engaged scholarship projects are closely intertwined with personal backgrounds. It is recommended that community engagement project leaders reflect on their rationales to build more robust projects.

Alasan untuk terlibat proyek beasiswa di satu perguruan tinggi di lembaga jarak jauh. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi alasan para pemimpin proyek beasiswa terlibat untuk memulai proyek beasiswa terlibat mereka di komunitas. Keterlibatan masyarakat (atau keterlibatan beasiswa) telah menjadi bagian wajib dari akademisi dan semakin menjadi upaya ilmiah. Akademisi di fakultas pendidikan di salah satu universitas di Afrika Selatan diminta untuk secara sukarela berpartisipasi dalam studi yang mengeksplorasi alasan mereka untuk memulai proyek beasiswa mereka. Wawancara semi-terstruktur diadakan dengan para pemimpin proyek. Tanggapan menunjukkan empat faktor dalam alasan, pertama, konteks yang dipilih untuk proyek terkait erat dengan pengalaman awal pemimpin proyek dalam pendidikan, kedua, pemimpin proyek memilih mata pelajaran yang dikenal bermasalah untuk diajarkan, ketiga, tantangan dalam konteks memotivasi pemimpin proyek. untuk terlibat dan terakhir, pemimpin proyek menunjukkan bahwa motivasi mereka untuk tetap terlibat dalam proyek berasal dari keinginan untuk mengembangkan proyek lebih lanjut. Penelitian ini terbatas pada pemimpin proyek di satu fakultas dan hanya terfokus pada alasan-alasan. Proyek beasiswa yang terlibat terkait erat dengan latar belakang pribadi. Direkomendasikan agar para pemimpin proyek pelibatan masyarakat merefleksikan alasan mereka untuk membangun proyek yang lebih kuat.

INTRODUCTION

Engaged scholarship seeks to understand complex problems from a variety of stakeholder perspectives (van de Ven, 2018). Universities can play a signification role in focusing the research lens on transforming society's problems into academic knowledge while the collaboration between communities and academics can make known academic knowledge useful in the world. Petersen and Kruss (2021) propose the university as a 'change agent' when collaboration with non-traditional partners in community engaged projects. Nkhoma (2020) highlights the positive transformation that can come about in Africa through community engagement. In South Africa, Bhagwan (2017) acknowledges the need for Higher education to embrace community engagement as a means to discovery and innovation while providing for the well-being of communities. This article aims to meet the need identified by Paphitis and Kelland (2015) (in Bhagwan, 2017) that engaged scholarship can help to develop a "unique South African philosophical identity" (p. 173). Furthermore, the South African context is one of a deeply unequal society, with the wealth inequality being rated as one of the highest in the world (statista.com). Engaged scholarship may be one avenue to level some of the inequalities that exist. Since engaged scholarship is one avenue of bridging inequality, this study focuses on the starting point for engaged scholarship projects, that being rationales. Our study will contribute toward the need for global perspectives in community engagement highlighted by Koekkoek, Ham and Kleinhans's (2021) literature review. In addition, we undertake to be cognizant of the sustainable development goals (SDG) as set out by the United Nations, specifically goal 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4).

The context of this study is a South African distance institution where engaged scholarship is a part of the job description of academics in their various fields. Academics undertake engaged scholarship with communities for various reasons and set up projects based on their own fields of specialisation and interests. Staff undertake a needs analysis and jointly, with the community, endeavor to solve their most urgent needs. Community engagement is only successful and sustainable if the needs are systematically and comprehensively understood. The university encapsulated that engagement must be scholarly, systematic, transformative and mutually beneficial (Faculty End of year showcasing, 2021) underscoring the institutional values. At one of the Colleges at the university, several community engagement projects are registered that cater for community needs across the nine provinces of South Africa. These projects, their deliverables and outcomes are expected to be factored into research outputs and be re-invested into the courses offered at the university. In this way, CE is conceptualised as a holistic integrated endeavour. The holistic and diverse nature of CE may lead to issues identified by Bhagwan (2017) with inconsistent definitions and lack of consistent terminology in the CE literature.

Although the role of engaged scholarship in the academic project has been proposed (Beaulieu, Breton & Brousselle, 2018) with various models of engaged scholarship identified (Franz, 2009; Holland, Powell, Eng, & Drew, 2010; Dawwas & Daragmeh, 2021), far less is known about the rationale for the choices academics make when embarking on engaged scholarship with communities. Higher education aims to enhance social justice through engaged scholarship projects (Machimana, Sefotho & Ebersohn, 2018) and although Nkhoma (2020) highlights the unique nature of community engagement projects and as such, we endeavored to understand the various personal rationales academics have for undertaking these projects. These personal rationales may assist in understanding the 'tensions and asymmetries' that arise when universities undertake engaged scholarship projects in resource constrained contexts (Petersen & Kruss, 2021).

Beaulieu et al (2018) study highlights the new role of academics when they take on engaged scholarship and place the academic at the center of engaged scholarship. This shift of engaged scholarship from the periphery to the center of the academic project changes the positionality of the academic. Douglas (2012) highlights that when CE becomes the center of the academic's role, then the issue of why (and not how) we engage with communities is important. In drawing on the perspectives of the academics involved in community engagement projects, we consider the perceptions of academics in engaged scholarship. We heed Franz (2009)'s call that "faculty need multiple entry and leverage points to practice and tell the story of their engaged scholarship" (p.175). The purpose of this paper is to explore investigate the rationale of the project leaders in selecting the content, context and community partners for their various projects. These three aspects were selected since they delineate the main areas of academic community engagement projects.

The research questions we sought to answer in this study are: What are the rationales for the choices academics make regarding their engaged scholarship projects? Although institutional motivation for undertaking engaged scholarship has been researched (see Koekkoek et al., 2021) more studies of a qualitative nature are needed to understand individual motivations behind engaged scholarship, although the institutional motivations may drive individual motivations and rationales. While Bhagwan (2020) sets out that the South African Higher Education landscape requires reform so that universities are more alert to and engaged in society's problems there is still a need for a greater conceptualisation of community engagement in local literature (Bhagwan, 2020).

In Beaulieu et al.'s (2018) scoping review of articles published in the field of community engagement or engaged scholarship, a number of themes emanated. These themes underpin the articles published but can also be used to analyse academics' rationales for their choices when engaging in CE. Beaulieu et al (2018) identified values, principles and processes of engaged scholarship articles. The values identified are social justice and citizenship, while they also found five principles of high-quality scholarship, reciprocity, and identified community needs, boundary crossing and democratization of knowledge. While they also highlighted that processes fall into two groups: individual (teaching, research, service) and institutional (mission, reward structure, logistical support and students).

Nkhoma (2020) interrogated how and for whom academics produce knowledge from their community engagement projects using Burawoy's, (2010) framework. Nkhoma (2020, p. 91) found that academics in Malawi had "multiple motives"

and "multiple aims" in their engaged scholarship. Nkhoma's (2020, p. 79) quantitative study found that academics were motivated to engage with communities to improve "their personal knowledge, transform society, use their personal skills to solve problems in society, and fulfill the desire to co-create knowledge with community partners and improve students' capacity to learn". We acknowledge the importance of Nkhoma's work and the usefulness of Burroway's framework. However, we believe that before we can explore the knowledge produced by academics at the particular institution in the study, we want to investigate the rationales and decision-making behind their projects from a qualitative perspective in the South African context. Bhagwan (2020) exposed a "lack of conceptual clarity" in the literature related to community engagement in South Africa, while also pointing out the paucity of benchmarking tools for university community engagement. Machimana, Sefotho and Ebersohn's, (2018) study found that challenges exist in South Africa when rural schools and higher education institutions collaborate in an engaged scholarships partnership. These scholars found structural mismatches and miscommunication regarding expectations. This article seeks to add to the conceptual clarity of engaged scholarship in South Africa by asking questions around the rationale for an engaged scholarship projects and understanding of the term "engaged scholarship".

Existing research reiterates that the university culture should be focused on new practices and its leadership and policies should allow for new ways of doing things (Bhagwan, 2020; Olowu, 2012). Mutually beneficially relationships between those inside the university (e.g. academics) and those outside the university (e.g. the people of South Africa) need to be nurtured if universities are to become and remain relevant in the everyday lives of people beyond the walls of the university and relevant in a decentralized, engaged academic space. While there are calls for the institutionalization of community engagement in South Africa, authentic institutionalization can only occur if all levels of the university (from management to individual project leaders) conceptualise and understand the role that community engagement or engaged scholarship plays in building robust teaching, learning and research spaces.

Theoretically, we also considered Little's (1983) conceptions of the personal project of people. Personal projects are defined as "a set of interrelated acts extending over time […] that reflect cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of human conduct" (p. 276). Little proposes four stages in the development of a personal project: inception; planning, action and termination. For the purposes of this study, inception is the relevant aspect of rationales academics have for their engaged scholarship projects. Inception comprises of four sub-phases of awareness, identification, pre-evaluation and acceptance (p. 277). Awareness involves an awakening of the personal need to undertake the project, identification means the project becomes more structured and clarified. Once the individual is aware of the protect potential, the project is pre-evaluated to determine if the project results would be in line with the individual's values and if the individual has the necessary resources to embark on the project. The final stage in the inception of the personal project is acceptance, where the individual decides to embark on the project. A commitment to the project involves private reflection and deliberation.

METHOD

This interpretivist qualitative research can be considered a case study of one faculty's community engagement projects and the rationale behind academics' choices for their projects. An interpretivist paradigm means that we interpret the subjective meanings that people give to their activities (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017) Our qualitative approach reflects our search for meaning and our need to understand the intentions and decisions of our participants.

We invited all project leaders (n=19) in one college to answer open-ended online questionnaires or take part in an online interview asking the same questions. This includes the reasons for starting the project and details regarding their decisions about the context, content and beneficiaries. The project leaders are all academics in the same faculty.

The participants are all distance education lecturers in the College of Education, with varying degrees of experience in academia. They were lecturing courses across ten different departments and at different levels (undergraduate and postgraduate). Their key performance indicators include teaching and learning, research, engaged scholarship and academic citizenship. The institution actively encourages engaged scholarship and assists with funding registered projects. At the time of the interviews these lecturers had spent a number of months working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and many projects had switched to online contact with stakeholders' partners. During the interviews, we asked questions such as that allowed us to focus on content, context and communities. (1). What was your main reason for becoming involved with community engagement? (2). Why did you select the province/schools/beneficiaries that you are working with? (community) (3). What motivates you to keep working in this context? (context) (4). How did you decide to select the specific content for the project? (content).

In terms of ethical practice, we secured ethical clearance from our institution and further explain our own positionality in this research to the participants. We are both project leaders for engaged scholarship projects in our faculty. One of us is the community engagement manager for the faculty while the other is the community engagement chair for one of the ten departments within the faculty.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary and interviewees could decline at any time and request to remove their responses up until the time that we publish. No identifying information will be presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We saved responses from Google forms in Word format and we transcribed the audio recordings. We coded each response according to the values, principles and processes in the rationales and look for central themes in the data. Although Beaulieu et al.'s (2018) work provides broad categories, we were wanting to identify and understand a more fine-

grained analysis of the rationale's each participant had for undertaking their engaged scholarship projects and to further explore their decisions regarding the context, content and beneficiaries for their projects. We will also use open coding when analysing the move from the term community engagement to engaged scholarship.

Reasons for starting the projects

The following three rationales became evident when coding the transcriptions. Project leaders were deeply focused on the context of their projects, both in terms of having had experience in this community and understanding the challenges of the community. They also focused on the difficulty in teaching the specific subject.

1. Own experiences in the same context

I worked under difficult conditions when I was a teacher in this province. I studied the same problem for my DEd study. I decided to help the teachers when I received funding so that I can share my experiences and implement the recommendations from my [D.Ed] study.

Other project leaders echoed this:

The province and the circuit selected is where I worked as a teacher and experienced the same problems

I wanted to fulfil the needs of those specific learners, so I chose that context. I had taught there for over 20 years.

Mbah (2019, p. 29) indicated that "local people can articulate the knowledge of what local community issues are, the knowledge of where local community issues are, the knowledge of when local community issues are apparent, and possibly the knowledge of how local community issues could be addressed, drawing on their lived experiences". It appears that the project leaders, having local knowledge serve the interests of their project communicates better. It may also be possible, that having project leaders who had been part of the community, may mitigate power gaps that can occur in projects involving the academe and communities.

2. Challenges that exist in the context

Project leaders indicated that they were familiar with the challenges in the context that they selected. They showed a deep understanding for the context and a need to serve the community in solving these challenges.

This project leaders spoke about challenges such as access to resources as well as isolation.

The rural community was selected as these schools often fact difficulties such as access to resources. The teachers may feel isolated and do not have many opportunities to share teaching strategies and learn from one another.

Another project leader said:

Teaching is already challenging in most schools and the community I work with have additional challenges such as isolation and accessing resources. I just feel that the project can help us all develop an understanding (and perhaps), mediate some of these additional challenges.

3. Challenges with the subject selected

One project leader made specific reference to the school subject that formed the content of the project.

You are aware of how poorly learners perform in mathematics. And for years I have experience problems with the abstractness of mathematics. We did try to use concrete objects, we tried all of that. But, how do you engage all the diverse learners in your class? Through my PhD study, I found that using games would help learners to learn and at the same time motivate and encourage them to take mathematics further. We need mathematics. We need to project ourselves as a South African country and how we achieve improving mathematics in South Africa.

Two of the project leaders specifically mentioned the knowledge they gained in their PhD or DEd studies. It appears that extensive knowledge coupled with the need to serve a known community is motivation for starting engaged scholarship projects. The participants being in the Faculty of Education may have a different outlook and perspective to lecturers in other colleges. One participant indicated that due to knowledge and experience with the subject, her confidence enables her to provide better support to the partners in her project.

I chose to work in this specific subject because I feel that with my experience in having taught this subject together with my experience in offering professional development will assist me in providing the support I would like to. I also feel more confident in supporting this subject than other subjects.

Motivation to continue with the project

When asked about their motivation to continue with their projects, the project leaders displayed beliefs and orientations to teaching as a profession as well as the intrinsic motivations to work with the project.

Teaching is close to my heart and I wanted to see learners succeed in their learning. I want to assist teachers to implement teaching methods that can facilitate learner-centered ideas so that learners can understand the content

It is the most rewarding work.

Richard, Berkey and Burk (2022) proposed that motivation is influenced by the amount of control and agency the person experiences during the activity. The responses indicate a strong sense of reward in terms of agency. In addition, they sense that project leaders are making a difference, engenders intrinsic motivation in community collaboration (Gibbs & Poisat, 2020).

I wish to see the project engaging teachers from different provinces and areas

The engagement also informs module development and my thinking about teaching and learning

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Initially it was about trying to improve mathematics, but now I want to take it more out there. Get engagement from stakeholders, write more, present more. Not only in SA, I am going to an international conference, I am going to take my project to Spain.

I continue with the project because I find it rewarding to solve problems or share ideas. Each time we have contact with the community teachers we learn a great deal and we try to solve problems together. The workshops seem to go so quickly, and I feel energized afterwards.

These responses indicate the affinity the project leader has with the project, learning from the project to improve teaching and the aim of growing the project. Their leadership in valuing and growing the projects is evident while their service orientation is also apparent. The projects appear to be meaningful to the project leader since they cite both innate motivation from the project and how the project is beneficial for teaching and research. The motivations cited focus on reciprocity, boundary crossing and identified community needs (Beaulieu et al., 2018). The institution, by creating enabling space for engaged scholarship projects, also promotes motivation in community engagement (Richard, Berkey and Burk (2022)

Broader conceptions around scholarship

The project leaders explained the broader and more holistic conceptions around engaged scholarship reflecting an approach to scholarship and knowledge that reveals their integrated understanding of engaged scholarship. One project leader included the reciprocity of knowledge in the project, showing that she validated the knowledge of the community outside the academe (Janke, Quan, Jenkins & Saltmarsh, 2022).

Scholarship is learning. It means the project aims for our colleagues to learn with the teachers. Knowledge is interrogated, developed and created together. It is an inclusive learning process with the aim to improve education.

The participant appears to set out her concept of engaged scholarship on *purpose and process* and not *activity and place* in shifting terms distinguished by Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011). Furthermore, she focuses on relational knowing and transformative learning (Davis, Kliewer & Nicolaides, 2017).

Another participant considered the broader impact of the project and the scholarly writing that would emanate from the project.

Engaged scholarship it so much bigger than just working with the community. You are engaging other stakeholders, you are engaging the academia. You are going to be writing, it is not just helping a community. Although I am helping this community, it will help other teachers too if they find out more about what I am doing. It involves engagement and collaboration.

However, her comments appear to be focusing on collaborative betterment and not collaborative empowerment (Himmelman, 2001). She may conceptualise engaged scholarship as a holding environment (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019) where she has been able to make sense of her engaged scholarship experiences. Her statement highlights reciprocity in her orientation towards engaged scholarship.

One participant felt that engaged scholarship was more reflective and scholarly that community engagement, highlighting Saltmarsh and Harley's (2011) move away from activity and place to purposes and processes. She also focused on the knowledge gained through the project involvement and not only giving knowledge to the community.

I think scholarship is about integrating the practical knowledge we gain from the project with scholarly practices of knowledge sharing. With scholarship there is a sense that we reflect on our work and the knowledge we have gained, that perhaps we are more responsive to a community problem.

We identify her focus on reciprocity, identified community needs and boundary crossing (Beaulieu et al. 2018) in her statement. She highlights that engaged scholarship crosses boundaries of practical and scholarly knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to explore project leader rationales for their engaged scholarship projects. The responses from the participants indicate a close affinity to their projects based on their personal congruence to the context and/or the school subject. This congruence allows for the project leaders to elicit problems that are experienced in this community while also acknowledging their responsibility for engaging with communities. Although none of the project leaders indicated it, being teachers in the same community may have assisted them in gaining trust of the community.

Motivation to continue with the project spanned three areas – serving the community in solving problems, improving their own teaching and engaging more fully in the project by involving others and producing scholarly work from the engagement. In many ways these responses echo Boyer's (1996) model of discovery, integration and sharing that underpins engaged scholarship. Notable is the intrinsic motivation evident in their responses.

When asked to reflect on the broader concepts of "engaged scholarship" the project leaders expressed a deeper understanding of learning and co-creating of knowledge that was imperative to this type of engagement. They saw their work as having more far reaching consequences than working with a single community in keeping with what Barnet (2011) called a university's mission of care.

We acknowledge the project leaders' significant role in working towards SDG 4 since they work with teachers who in turn will impact learners' experiences in the classroom. We recommend that further research be carried out on the multi-tiered approach to rationales that project leaders have in terms of including teacher and students' views and perceptions of the projects.

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