



Making universities work for local communities: a community psychology project extending knowledge boundaries beyond the campus

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Quotation information

LAWTHOM, Rebecca; DUCKETT, Paul (2008), "Making universities work for local communities: a community psychology project extending knowledge boundaries beyond the campus". *Proceedings of the 4th International Barcelona Conference on Higher Education, Vol. 8. Higher education and citizenship, participation and democracy*. Barcelona: GUNI. Available at <http://www.guni-rmies.net>.

Abstract

Background

The authors report on a study which explored ways in which teaching, learning and the curriculum could be made more relevant to the communities in which they were situated. Manchester Metropolitan University is a good example of the paradox of modern Universities. It employs an explicit Widening participation agenda, mindful of the low uptake of Higher education in the region (less than 1 in 5 young people take



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up University places). It wants to extend the 'campus' out to communities which it serves. Indeed, Manchester as a large Northern city has many wards with high deprivation indices, high unemployment and poor health outcomes. The University 'corridor', comprising Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Manchester is a high income generating area in Manchester. However, half a mile either side of this University corridor lies areas of high deprivation, for example, two areas in Manchester register in the top ten deprivation areas. There is much urban regeneration and Manchester is called a 'Knowledge capital'. How can we make the 'academy' both more accessible and more relevant to its geographical constituency and members?

The project

The present study is funded by a large Higher Education Innovation Fund, which was designed to demonstrate ways in which Higher Education Institutions can work effectively and participatively to effect change within geographical regions. Dubbed the URMAD project (Urban Regeneration Making a Difference) 4 broad areas are covered: health, community cohesion, crime and enterprise. This project is located in the community cohesion strand and is called Making Universities Work for Local Communities. The Project has to be more than a typical academic research endeavour with outputs and outcomes which had other beneficiaries. Project partners had to work collaboratively with community groups – indeed the ideas were generated and posed through engagement and participation. Making universities work for local communities drew inspiration from two distinct drivers.

One driver came from within the academy as a group of community psychologists had developed a curriculum option entitled Community Psychology whereby students worked on a small scale social change project with members of a community around issues of marginalisation. This community engagement model transgressed normative models whereby psychology students use human participants to extract and gather data. Rather, students drew upon action research models (central to community psychology practice) to work collaboratively with community groups and



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partners. Here, students and community partners are engaging rather differently in forging networks of relationships (both outside and within institutional boundaries). Posing curriculum as engagement and framing community psychology as a values driven approach, comprising social justice and stewardship, potentially produces different kinds of knowledge from productive collaborations.

The second driver is derived from work and collaboration with community partners. Cries of irrelevance or being seen as subjects of study are claims often made by community partners of universities who want to work with them. How can knowledge be made more relevant and pertinent and useful to communities? One social enterprise development initiative is tasked and funded with the aim of generating skills and development in local communities. In working with them on a related project, community partners queried how graduates within universities exited with any useful knowledge, particularly anything that could be applied to local settings. With these drivers in mind, we embarked upon a study which mapped student development of skills and competencies across the graduate training. This was undertaken through analysis of students' personal development skill reflections within portfolios and modules (such as community psychology) where skill reflection was present.

The Purpose

The aim of this project is to make the teaching of health and social care subject areas increasingly responsive to the needs of communities through connecting local community partners into three elements of HE curricula delivery and administration (management of placement and research projects; unit/module validation, and a skills database generated through student Personal Development Records).

The project began by mapping best practice in making teaching programmes responsive to local communities. Structural innovations in undergraduate and postgraduate community psychology units have been evaluated for their effectiveness in terms of making the curriculum more accountable to community needs and the degree to which such activities encourage parallel interventions in our partners at other Universities.



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Preliminary analysis shows that reframing curriculum in line with a values approach (here community psychology values of social justice etc.) are potentially useful ways to

- 1) train citizens who are mindful of academic privilege and the need for bottom up participation
- 2) allow Higher Education Institutions to both be responsive to local drivers and practice reciprocity.

Global initiatives around citizenship need a glocal forum in order to be successful – building alliances and making universities work for local communities is a step toward this. This model of community engagement by students and ultimately universities indicates a productive approach in two interrelated ways. Firstly, in extending the university campus it offers a useful way of meaningful community engagement which has benefits for all stakeholders – the translation of prior ‘intellectual’ knowledge into useful local knowledge and skills. Secondly, the pedagogy involved here is more socially just – in that students are reporting and reflecting on knowledge which is generated through meaningful activity. The theoretical and practical insights from this mode of working with students and communities has implications for ways in which students embrace post student citizenship and participate in governance beyond University life.

Background

The authors report on a study which explored ways in which teaching, learning and the curriculum could be made more relevant to the communities in which they were situated. Manchester Metropolitan University is a good example of the paradox of modern Universities. It employs an explicit Widening participation agenda, mindful of the low uptake of Higher education in the region (less than 1 in 5 young people take up University places). It wants to extend the ‘campus’ out to communities which it serves. Indeed, Manchester as a large Northern city is the economic heart of the North but has many wards with high deprivation indices, high unemployment and poor health outcomes. The University ‘corridor’, comprising Manchester Metropolitan University



and University of Manchester is a high income generating area in Manchester. However, half a mile either side of this University corridor lies areas of high deprivation, for example, two areas in Manchester register in the top ten deprivation areas in the UK. There is much urban regeneration and Manchester is called a 'Knowledge capital'. How can we make the 'academy' both more accessible and more relevant to its geographical constituency and members?

The project

The present study is funded by a large Higher Education Funding Council, which was designed to demonstrate ways in which Higher Education Institutions can work effectively and participatively to effect change within geographical regions. Duggan and Kagan (2008) note that 'community engagement has been slow to become a legitimate part of the work of Higher education Institutions. The project called Making Universities work for local communities' fell within a larger project. Dubbed the URMAD project (Urban Regeneration Making a Difference) 4 broad areas are covered: health, community cohesion, crime and enterprise across 5 academic institutions. This current project is located in the community cohesion strand which encompasses Community Psychology and Wellbeing, Urban Education, and Sport and Physical Activity. The Project is more than a typical academic research endeavour with outputs and outcomes which has other beneficiaries. Project partners had to demonstrate working collaboratively with community groups – indeed the ideas were generated and posed through engagement and participation. Making universities work for local communities drew inspiration from two distinct drivers.

One driver came from within the academy as a group of community psychologists had developed a curriculum option entitled Community Psychology whereby students worked on a small scale social change project with members of a community around issues of marginalisation. This community engagement model transgressed normative models whereby psychology students use human participants to extract and gather data. Rather, students drew upon action research models (central to community psychology practice) to work collaboratively with community groups and partners. Here, students and community partners are engaging rather



differently in forging networks of relationships (both outside and within institutional boundaries). Posing curriculum as engagement and framing community psychology as a values driven approach, comprising social justice and stewardship, potentially produces different kinds of knowledge from productive collaborations.

The second driver is derived from work and collaboration with community partners. Cries of irrelevance or being seen as subjects of study are claims often made by community partners of universities who want to work with them. How can knowledge be made more relevant and pertinent and useful to communities? One social enterprise development initiative is tasked and funded with the aim of generating skills and development in local communities. In working with them on a related project, community partners queried how graduates within universities exited with any useful knowledge, particularly anything that could be applied to local settings. With these drivers in mind, we embarked upon a study which mapped student development of skills and competencies across the graduate training. This was undertaken through analysis of students' personal development skill reflections within portfolios and modules (such as community psychology) where skill reflection was present.

Defining what students are doing

Whilst debates around citizenship have focused around defining social good and by extension what being a good citizen entails, less focus is directed at the interface between citizenship and volunteering or other areas of life (i.e. education). Higher education establishments and surrounding communities routinely provide a community in which students can potentially gain education, advice, safety, services etc without necessarily expecting anything back in return. So the communities and neighbourhood that they inhabit temporarily do not gain much from the student population. Exceptions to this model are degrees which involve placements (where students spend extended time within a setting or organization and are assessed on this) and project work (whether a by product may of benefit to the setting like an evaluation). Exponents of community engagement argue that a shift in policy and practice is necessary to fundamentally orient the values and purpose of universities.



In terms of community it presents a challenge to universities to be of and not just in the community; not simply to engage in 'knowledge transfer' but to establish a dialogue across the boundary between the university and its community which is open ended, fluid and experimental. (Watson, 2003:16)

Defining academic boundaries and community boundaries

Boundaries of academic institutions are increasingly being re-evaluated with entry (widening participation) and notions of academic enterprise or Third stream activity. The latter refers to a spectrum of activities which are wide ranging. At one pole, there is commercial activity which crosses academic and corporate lines using terms such as knowledge transfer partnerships – here the exchange utilises money and knowledge (potentially realising intellectual property). At the other end of the pole are far less measurable encounters with community groups, voluntary and public sector organizations where the exchange currency is less open to metrics, but useful in terms of social good (Davidson, 2004). As if this complexity does not pose enough problems as we try to widen engagement with local communities, there is the added issue of defining the parameters of the community. Theoretical definitions of community continue to thrive in academic circles forming part of a curriculum in degree programmes. Rather than reaching out to business HEIs are being exhorted to 'reach out to communities' (Duggan and Kagan, 2008). This, reaching out, the 'doing' of community, the engagement of working with communities is a different matter. Informal volunteering in Manchester is relatively high (Williams, 2003, 2005) but what is the nature of the sector where the doing of community is practised – the so called 'third sector'? Kendall and Knapp (1995) term the Third Sector as a 'loose and baggy monster' with overlapping forms and functions. The Office for the Third Sector estimates that the sector includes more than 164,000 charities, between 200,000-500,000 small community groups, 55,000 social enterprises including 1000 community interest companies (DTI, 2006). This kind of looseness offers possibilities for much engagement but difficult territory to evaluate if and how things are working.

Strengthening Communities and local citizenship

Whilst the majority of the Third sector's relationships occur at the local level (Kagan, 2008) it is difficult to improve communities given the 'baggyness' of the sector. Proposals by the UK Department of Communities and Local Government for improving engagement with the Third Sector areas set out in the Third Sector strategy for Communities and Local Government (Discussion paper June 2007). Volunteering is seen as making a significant contribution towards a more cohesive society and various government initiatives are in place. In March 2006, a £3 million cross government initiative Volunteering for all to identify and remove barriers to successful volunteering. The recent report of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering Manifesto for Change (January 2008) called for a 'culture change in society so that helping others and benefiting from a culture of mutual dependence become a way of life, from which the whole society benefits'. Above, we have outlined some of the complexity present in mapping terms and agendas, pointing to the need for a particular approach.

The unique community psychology approach

Within the project the authors draw from an approach defined as community psychology or community social psychology (see Burton and Kagan, 2007). This values based approach deals explicitly with social justice agendas, good stewardship and positive notion of community. Traditional ways of professionals working on people are replaced by working with people collaboratively. Notion of ownership, co-production of knowledge, capacity building and sustainability are key to potentially transform the settings in which people themselves have designated as needing change. Action research is utilised as a way of engaging reflection upon action and combining multiple stakeholder viewpoints.

The Purpose of Making Universities work for local communities

The aim of this project is to make the teaching of health and social care subject areas increasingly responsive to the needs of communities through connecting local community partners into three elements of HE curricula delivery and administration (management of placement and research projects; unit/module validation, and a skills

database generated through student Personal Development Records). The examples for each strand derive from psychology programmes where we find evidence and a demonstrable commitment to engage.

1. Management of placement and research projects – lost in translation?

Working across university boundaries and communities poses interesting linguistic problems. Placement is an obvious contentious definition – from a university perspective this typically means assessing practice in a setting. However, much of the work between community groups and students was of an informal nature and thus not subject to implications for practice.

A case study of community engagement using community psychology

A community psychology module works at third level (Undergraduate) and Masters on action research principles. Students make links with community groups (voluntary, third sector etc) to work collaboratively on an issue of change. The agenda is not preformed and thus practice cannot be assessed. We are interested here in how students reflect on their learning. One such student contacts a women's design network which is interested in regeneration issues broadly. It is linked to a gender and participation initiative which forefronts women's issues in governance. The project work entails workshops, facilitating meetings, publicising the network and linking across networks in the region to grown membership. The tasks can all be identified as roles that community psychologists may do (see Kagan et al, 2006) but far less measurable as practice. Hence this work is not a placement in its narrowest definition but an experience of volunteering, good citizenship, knowledge transfer etc.

Many of these community partners are keen to develop a dialogue between their setting and the university. This kind of positive interaction requires delicate handling in terms of management of expectations and exchange. We have been working to develop a database of community partners who can access students when necessary but also eventually communicate with each other (using Wiki spaces). Using a website entitled Community Psychology in Higher Education (www.cphe.org) we can see that

teaching materials and access to this is less important and certainly less meaningful for community partners.

At an event where academics and community partners came together to map out an agenda for University Community partnerships, cynicism was evident regarding intentions of University partners.

We don't believe you want a genuine partnership. With academia, it never feels as if the balance is right because knowledge is power and academics tend to have a kind of knowledge which is conveyed in a language which seems to be more powerful than the language used in communities. Our language is as valuable and is the meat of the very work you produce. (Community group 1 summary feedback, cited in Duggan and Kagan, 2008)

However, the potential benefits of working in this way were also articulated –

Experiences of working with universities has been generally good. There is kudos by association – sometimes we are listened to more by service providers. They(university researchers) put terms and theories and action behind their findings. For example, we did not know we were deprived our group was written about in those terms.

(Community group 2 cited in Duggan and Kagan 2008)

Whilst as academic we can of course theorise about these partnerships using exactly the kind of language critiqued by community groups, the project aim was to facilitate collaboration – by working at the edges of two distinct communities (HEIs and groups). Kagan has written about the edge effect (2007) as a way of working inside out boundaries and outside in boundaries.

2. Unit and module validation

The project began by mapping best practice in making teaching programmes responsive to local communities. Particular aspects of the degree programmes routinely offer possibility (such as community psychology). Structural innovations in undergraduate and postgraduate community psychology units have been evaluated for their effectiveness in terms of making the curriculum more accountable to community

needs and the degree to which such activities encourage parallel interventions in our partners at other Universities. Here again different agendas collide. Whilst partnerships between universities and communities are desired – the language of an academic process such as validation is alien. Whilst we would want to make this process transparent a number of issues emerge. The academic agenda (directed through Quality standards etc) requires peer validation of degree programmes. This process is somewhat theoretical and relatively disengaged with needs of communities. Paradoxically, an agenda sculpted purely through community needs may well ignore or downplay theory in favour of skills. Moreover, asking community groups to spend time evaluating academic courses requires skills and unpaid time which may be in short supply in this sector. Rather, it is the informal evaluation and ‘validation’ which proves useful.

A case of designing the curriculum ?

The module Community Psychology directs students to work outside academic boundaries in community settings. Using ideas borrowed from communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), we can see that learning often happens in asymmetric settings – where knowing can be co-constructed. Communities of practice theory posit a radically different approach to learning which is fundamentally social. Here, it is participation in settings which allows learning to occur which then impacts upon settings, Simply, learning here is iterative and both traditional knowers and learners can gain from this participation. Taking this into a community setting we can see that students doing project work in community settings have the curriculum constructed not only by academics within the institution but also from community members. Here, all of the activities which occur within the community can be seen as curricular and impacting upon learning. Academics, community members and students all can potentially gain from this seemingly informal unit validation. Rather than using formal mechanisms to ‘validate’ units the focus of study, the learning is shaped through negotiation with community members.

3. Developing a student skill database – (im)personal (non)development

The third strand of the project was around mapping skills students had and developed throughout their degree programme. This again was to identify and show communities what was on offer and where gaps may be. The requirements and language of personal development has shifted to universities. Students have to annually report on skill acquisition and generic development. However, the form of this reflexivity and commentary is not without problems. Although the personal development portfolios in years one and two allowed students to situate their development more widely than academic skills, notions of citizenship and participation were largely absent from this work. Rather students listed a prosaic array of academic skills such as essay writing, IT etc rather than other behaviours and skills (more suited to engagement). From the students' perspectives development here was seen as an individual product centred on the market – i.e. gaining a job post qualification. Personal development had been transformed into (im)personal (non) development. However, much of this reduction may be attributed to a narrow notion of skill being allied with intellectualism and performance management (c.f. Sennett, 2008).

Skills used in community settings

Analysis of skills utilised in community settings were very differently reflected upon. Here students drew upon wider notions of skills inherent in community psychology (Kagan et al 2006). Skills utilised here included interpersonal communication skills; social problem solving skills; organization skills; and research skills. These are linked to experiences of group work (where the task may not be a common one). So implicit are some of these skills that students forget to define them as skills. However, these skills which involve an array of competencies are wider than the academic agenda. Domains such as working with others, managing small projects and evaluating their worth would be useful ways of reconfiguring a meaningful 'graduateness'. Student comments and evaluation on this aspect of their degree was very positive and more in line with their imagined sense of what psychology can offer.



The three strands of work and a preliminary analysis shows that reframing curriculum in line with a values approach (here community psychology values of social justice etc.) are potentially useful ways to

- 1) train citizens who are mindful of academic privilege and the need for bottom up participation
- 2) allow Higher Education Institutions to both be responsive to local drivers and practice reciprocity.

It is within the current climate that writers have talked about the tyranny of participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) but using the model above we have presented a proactive approach to citizenship. Here good citizenship practices may be defined by community members and engagement in collaborative knowledge exchange potentially more fruitful.

Global initiatives around citizenship need a glocal forum in order to be successful – building alliances and making universities work for local communities is a step toward this. This model of community engagement by students and ultimately universities indicates a productive approach in two interrelated ways. Firstly, in extending the university campus it offers a useful way of meaningful community engagement which has benefits for all stakeholders – the translation of prior ‘intellectual’ knowledge into useful local knowledge and skills. We realise that this is a relationship which needs careful thought (Duckett, 2002). Secondly, the pedagogy involved here is more socially just – in that students are reporting and reflecting on knowledge which is generated through meaningful activity. The theoretical and practical insights from this mode of working with students and communities has implications for ways in which students embrace post student citizenship and participate in governance beyond University life.



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