An integrated mentoring strategy for service learning in higher education

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Abstract

Higher education in South Africa, in general, has been charged with the lack of clear strategy and commitment to relevant teaching and research that is grounded in experiential and emancipatory approaches to learning, especially given the dearth of institutional responsiveness to social responsibility. The result is that students have not been sufficiently prepared as graduates to meet the demands of socially responsible citizenship. As a pedagogy, service learning aims to link higher education institutional curricular work to communities and in such a way become responsive in terms of teaching, learning and research which seek to engage the realities and needs of local communities. In this process students and institutions themselves become beneficiaries of this engagement. Against the backdrop of the broader political and social transformation and that of education in particular, most institutions of higher education seem not to be able to respond to the requirements of the National Higher Education Plan in terms of implementing programmes which are in line with the criteria of responsiveness and relevance in their teaching and research. Whilst introducing service learning into their curricular approach may in itself be radical or strange for some institutions, its actual incorporation into their programmes may require very strategic mentoring processes for its adoption and practical rolling out of plans to succeed. This article advocates that mentoring, whatever the local context, is neither the exclusive prerogative nor the exclusive function of the teaching staff. The article argues that, to be effective, mentoring processes should be integrated into the broader domain of student learning and development and will of necessity take on many different hues, shapes and purposes in terms of student and community needs on the one hand and the demands of institutional and academic programmes on the other. With regard to those academic disciplines which seek to introduce service learning into their teaching and research programmes, this article advocates and explores an integrated mentor scheme which ought to meet the personal, academic and future professional needs of students. Instead of focusing on a limited notion in the selection of mentoring strategies for vulnerable students only, the authors argue towards the need for developing a thorough understanding of the nature and purpose of the learning context and its incumbent relationships in which the student, institution and the community creatively develop and, as a result, re-invent themselves to optimise their capital and ongoing growth.

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INTRODUCTION

The central question this article addresses is whether higher education institutions in South Africa are sufficiently addressing the needs of students by contextualising and integrating academic curricula with service delivery in communities. While the purposes of higher education may essentially be regarded as teaching, research and service, the latter seems to remain the centre of debates in South Africa, especially with regard to transforming higher education. Part of the debate derives from the way institutions seek to reconceptualise and redefine their purpose by seeking to address the content of their institutional mission statements (Weigert 1998).

Higher educational institutions have been challenged for their general lack of connection to secondary education, between workplace and academic study, and linking academic work to that of the community (Eyler & Giles 1999). Furthermore academics have been criticised for their general neglect or inability to teach and mentor students in terms of the social relevance of their course design and course delivery. They are moreover charged with demonstrating little commitment to relevant teaching that is grounded in experiential and emancipatory approaches to learning, particularly the absence or dearth of institutional responsiveness to social responsibility (Kezar & Rhoads 2001; Checkoway 2001). According to Cloete & Bunting (2000) the higher education system is not sufficiently equipping and mentoring the majority of students with appropriate skills to function efficiently in the modern knowledge-based economy and in its diverse and complex socio-cultural environment. In order to operationalise service as the third goal of higher education institutions, service-learning could be the vehicle that links academic learning outcomes, service in communities and civic education.

Service-learning as such could become a vital force in educational change and promote social equity by enabling the advancement of historically disadvantaged communities. In the process of poverty alleviation service-learning could serve as a mechanism to attract and enlist the talents and skills of students in communities. Students would have been provided with opportunities in which they are mentored to integrate theory with practice in real life contexts while at the same time, linking school to communities and thought to action through structured initiatives (Eyler & Giles 1999). In terms of collaboration between academics, students and communities, service-learning holds multiple potential benefits for both higher education institutions and their local communities as knowledge, action and experience increasingly become integrated (Perold 1998). This however is part and parcel of the challenge students and educators face in the production of knowledge in a transforming South Africa.

DEFINING SERVICE LEARNING

Service-learning generally has a wide range of definitions and naturally would evoke a wide range of reactions. Due to the diverse interpretations of the purposes
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of service-learning many different definitions of service learning have been recorded in the literature (Eyler & Giles 1999; Stanton 1999; Howard 1998; Jacoby 1996). Based on the various definitions it could be said that service-learning essentially entails an inextricable teaching and experiential learning strategy that:

- is a credit bearing educational experience;
- in which students actively perform a community service as part of their academic course-work whilst seeking to meet the needs of the community;
- distinguishes community service from service-learning by connecting all service activities to the envisaged learning outcomes of the course of study;
- seeks to integrate action, reflection and social engagement;
- provides structured time for students to think, discuss and write about their observations during their service activities;
- allows students to use their skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities, and
- seeks to build bridges with community partners and integrates personal experience into the curriculum.

Service-learning may therefore be conceived as a well-structured mode of teaching and learning interaction and partnership between academic institution, students and the community. It is assumed that all stakeholders will collaborate, share, learn and apply their knowledge, skills, values and experience within the community for the benefit of all stakeholders — ie institution and community.

The notion of service has become a contested concept in service-learning precisely because it is viewed from different ideological and moral perspectives. Community service is generally viewed from a philanthropic perspective while service-learning is based on a civic perspective (Henning 1998; Pollack 1999). A philanthropic perspective emphasises the spirit of altruism, while the civic perspective regards mutual respect and interdependence of rights and responsibilities as being important. The latter emphasises the nurturing of citizenship and the understanding of the interdependence of communities, based on democratic, civic values as being central to service-learning (Henning 1998). Unlike the educational aims of service-learning, too many community service programmes still seem to be charitable in their intention and do not seek to address the social conditions of communities (Perold 1998). A civic perspective of service learning essentially encourages the idea of reciprocity and collaboration between all stakeholders in order to transform service into effective service-learning. In the context of South Africa’s social transformation students can be mentored in service-learning to address deeply embedded social problems in order to bring about structural changes both in social and economic relations and the development of society.
CURRICULUM PROCESSES OF SERVICE LEARNING

This article focuses on the ongoing institutional social practices, ie examining the effects of the unfolding dynamics in lectures or tutorials between students and students, and students and lecturers, and how these impact either directly or indirectly on their communities beyond the traditional institutional boundaries. While mentoring by definition is generally regarded as a pedagogical element, it is by no means a substitute for mere subject tutoring or supervision of practical work. Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995:30) argue that the role of mentors will be focused on the individual learner and, whilst assisting them to critically wade through career choices, also act as friends who play the role of adversary in challenging assumptions, listening and encouraging them to widen their own views. It can be argued that the vision of an effective and holistic service-learning project in higher education curriculum processes will be contingent on the value and quality of a well-planned and integrated mentoring programme. The latter therefore has to be conceptualised as emerging from the interactive ways of integrating students’ personal learning and the mastery of new values, skills and attitudes — especially how these may actually and potentially influence the curriculum vis-à-vis the realities in communities in terms of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework where institutional teaching, learning and research on the one hand, and community action to concrete community problems on the other, occur simultaneously (Rahman 1993:91).

Since service-learning will be regarded as being part of the strategic conceptual framework envisaged for the higher education curriculum, it must also be seen as forming part of very definite critically-contextualised social-participatory processes. This would clearly be opposite to the general prevailing technocratic concept of curriculum as a pre-packaged product offered as ‘the course of study’. Regarding therefore the ideological negotiations of service-learning discourses, practitioners may be mindful that curriculum conceptions, modes of reasoning and institutional practices can by no means pretend to be value-free (Van Wyk 2003). Daloz (1999:227) argues that mentors ‘... can use a new language, magic words in which are contained whole different frames of reference. Thus language can be a catalyst for change as well as an indicator of it.’ Contestations of power are very often contestations of perceptions and experiences, and implicitly or explicitly, Cornwall (1990:8) argues that such discourses (whether of service-learning or mentoring) ‘... carry assumptions about what is regarded as valued knowledge, appropriate schooling, the desirable society and relations between individuals and social institutions’. Generally such notions of ‘valued knowledge’, ‘appropriate schooling’ and ‘desirable society’ envisaged by institutions from their diverse territorial perches, are hopefully honed in the context of their own mission and vision. How skills and competencies are synchronised between institution-based instruction and community-based deliberations (Furlong et al 2000:40) remains a contentious issue for rolling out an effective service-learning programme for
student capacity building. Central to this process of co-learning and the synchronisation of the institutional curriculum and community activities as praxis, ie the interaction between action and reflection, resides at the root of developing appropriate service-learning skills as an emerging practice (Castle & Osman 2003) in the South African higher education sector. In order to advance the diverse agendas of transformation in higher education this emerging practice of service-learning must be supported by a critical mentoring programme that integrates diverse institutional activity and social-education work with action and critical consciousness (Boersema & Maconachie 1995).

CRITICAL MENTORING IN SERVICE LEARNING

To the extent that students are strategically supported in actual mentoring processes for their own learning vis-à-vis social reconstruction, they will learn to critically discern the social relevance of the knowledge content of the curriculum, not by mere reference to some supposed intrinsic value which it is claimed it has or by reference to its assumed effectiveness to secure certain extrinsic aims but rather in relation to its likely contribution to the development and empowerment of their community. By equalising this relationship Beresford and Evans (1999:673–674) argue that increased inclusion and active involvement is effected. Given its prime value or merit of ‘working in partnership’, critical mentoring sees as its purpose not merely as those goals to be achieved at some later stage in the process but rather as procedural principles in the power relations which guide actual practice throughout the process. Therefore if mentoring entails the critical process of one person to another in making ‘significant transitions in knowledge, work or just simply their thinking’ (Megginson & Clutterbuck 1995:13) then lecturers in the higher education sector cannot assume this simply to be a value-free or top-down form of institutionally-based expertise sharing in that they believe that service-learning mentoring would merely be a form of unproblematic or customary practice. In the Foucaultian sense the discourse of service-learning will of necessity become the discursive space where knowledge is not simply monitored but actually made, ie it becomes a situated reflexivity of openness and fluidity of practice (Foucault 1981) to find solutions that would be in line with social justice and equity. Daloz (1999:217) argues towards the critical role mentors play in that they ‘... toss little bits of disturbing information in their students’ paths, little facts and observations, insights and perceptions, theories and interpretations — cow plops on the road to truth — that raise questions about students’ current worldviews and invite them to entertain alternatives to close the dissonance, accommodate their structures, think afresh’.

Given the ever changing nature of communities and hopefully the reciprocal changing and responsive role of institutions, service-learning strategies would increasingly demand of staff to engage in challenging and responsive mentoring approaches in the form of strategic and guided development of students.
Curriculum processes towards the development of studies therefore cannot be conceived in any other way than as some kind of guided development towards self-reliance on the one hand, and as facilitating social change on the other. The key issue here is in the very nature of socially-critical guidance, for even content-based approaches to education must have some notion of critical development at their base (Kelly 1999:83). The negotiated criteria for socially-critical guided development to advance an appropriate service-learning pedagogy, as being part of action learning, will be premised on essentially two broad principles, viz. that of knowledge-sharing on the one hand, and learner involvement and participant reflection on their own actions on the other.

These sharing and involvement aspects of mentoring in the service-learning curriculum as praxis (ie the ongoing interaction between action and reflection) will inform the critical dimension of student empowerment which will allow them to gain control over their own levels of ‘competence’ as opposed to displaying mere ‘performance’ (Bernstein 1996). In this context the significance of students gaining competence in the mentoring engagement is particularly congruent with the Habermasian view, ie it being tantamount to social and emancipatory interest of students who will have experienced mentoring challenges in issues such as those which include experience in critical reflection, social negotiation and the organisation of action (Le Grange 2002:50). Clearly, critically guided development of students rather than being a top-down approach, must be socially negotiated in a way that students themselves will develop a critical disposition and as such develop their own competence in the context of the knowledge of their field of study.

In terms of the principles of PAR, the emancipatory model may be strategically initiated in and through those processes on the one end of the continuum of building coaching skills, ie developing new competencies, learnings and goal attainment (Roston 2002). Towards the other end of the continuum will be devised those precipitating processes towards mentoring which entail the development of consensual social and personal values in students. Against the backdrop of the plethora of transformative discourses of education and training underway in South Africa, both educators and students will have engaged in socially critical thinking as being an integral part of what is regarded as academic excellence. Therefore, quite apart from those instrumentalist appeals to higher education which view the much contested notion of excellence as a matter of fitness for purpose, mentoring as a self-empowering strategy for building a ‘community of quality’ (Nightingale & O’Neil 1997:165) becomes imperative. The social interaction dimension of the notion of excellence is generally necessary to enhance an ethos of critical friendship, ie the idea of a group of critical friends in networking through action research in many higher education courses, whilst giving feedback and providing a critique of actions planned and undertaken (Nightingale & O’Neil 1997:168). This increased inclusive practice presupposes as well as actually mobilises collective objective-setting in service-learning programmes conducted in graduate work.
SHARED OBJECTIVES OF MENTORING

The overall intent of mentoring processes is primarily to recover and unleash student potential by developing increased communication with all stakeholders in the context of day-to-day working experiences to develop ‘a sense of empathy with community members’ (Henning 1998). On the other hand the purpose is to become critical friends in developing the qualities to promote the skills of being an active listener, provide clear descriptions, give affirmation and encouragement, yet also tactfully offering alternative ideas in constructive rather than negative criticism. (Nightingale & O’Neil 1997:168). Where this participatory and emancipatory view of mentoring as a form of praxis of critical thinking and reflection has not clearly mapped for action learning in higher education, as was patent in the case in the Hillbrow Community Partnership, this omission may prove problematic, if not disastrous for all partners involved (Castle & Osman 2003:109). Whereas the traditional debates about excellence in higher education have for many professionals continued to feed into mentoring processes which are bent on producing first-rate internationally competitive research among students, and for others that of producing graduates to build a competitive economy (Vale 2003:1–2), it could be argued that there need not necessarily be this type of dichotomous thinking in the present curriculum debates. Excellence through service-learning mentoring programmes may call for greater negotiation and synergism of intellectual excellence and community action, and such be relevant.

The either-or pattern of thinking which had become entrenched in academic discourses of excellence may be avoided in pursuing shared and integrative practices of curriculating higher education programmes which, given the availability of adequate provisioning of resources, could pose the possibility of achieving both and more. The ultimate purpose of a critical mentoring practice would be the integrating within individual students the psycho-social element of their own development with that of career choices (Gibb & Megginson 1993). Daloz (1999:18) speaks rather poetically of the fact that ‘... mentors give us the magic that allows us to enter the darkness: a talisman to protect us from evil spells, a gem of wise advice, a map ... but always the mentor appears near the outset of the journey as a helper, equipping us ... for what is to come, a midwife to our dreams’. While it is not the aim of an effective mentor scheme to solve every problem that is brought to it, it must however be flexibly designed to meet the personal and professional needs of students through a set of integrated shared objectives. Partnering various efforts in terms of these shared objectives cannot as a result be the exclusive prerogative of the institution or any member of staff. Subsequently it becomes necessary to ensure that at the outset of the delivery or intervention that all stakeholders, ie students, peer mentors and lecturers, (1) develop a common understanding of what exactly mentoring entails, (2) clarify the shared objectives of mentoring, (3) define the needs of students and staff vis-à-vis the envisaged service-learning project, (4) construct practical
procedures for mentors and mentees to engage with one another and (5) compile an effective assessment model for the mentoring scheme. Throughout the mentoring implementation process there will be on the one hand processes of collective reflection and on the other the self-realisation of confidence in students’ own abilities by sharing in their experiences towards building appropriate competency.

INTEGRATED MENTORING PROGRAMME DELIVERY

Whatever the nature of the shared objectives towards competency, as entailed in mentoring for service-learning programmes, institutions may not lose sight of the fact that academic and career development principles applied cannot be isolated from continuous learning and developing improved capacity for working for and with others. Procedurally therefore any effective mentoring programme cannot be an automatic process or one which should be left to chance. It will indeed entail a vigorously critical process of integrated procedures of pre-planning of both mentor and mentee in order that both parties may enter the process adequately briefed so that they could realistically know what to expect and what they hope to gain from the experience. Consequently, in terms of institutional responsiveness various faculties and departments need to consider vital questions pertaining to institutional and other logistics, ie (1) who will coordinate the system, (2) how will the system be coordinated, and (3) how and where will mentors come from. The practices of ongoing monitoring, openness to dialogue and a commitment to social responsiveness underscore the demand for strategic participation and action in an effective mentoring process.

To respond to the logistical questions in terms of their strategic planning, institutions may do well to engage in service-learning programmes as opposed to service-learning projects. To understand the technical distinction between projects and programmes, one could glean the views of Wijnen and Kor (2000) who argue that projects are seen as focusing on realising a single predetermined result, whereas programmes strive to achieve a number of goals that may sometimes be conflicting. They argue that the project approach primarily directs institutional energy while the programme approach integrates and combines such energy. Whilst projects might focus on defining the final outcome, higher education institutional management will furthermore emphasise the establishment of which integrated activities are more likely to be relevant for the achievement of their institution’s mission and vision.

Before setting out to mobilise an integrated participatory mentorship programme it may be necessary that envisaged outcomes and shared objectives be properly negotiated and defined. These would obviously be communicated among stakeholders, for contrary to project outcomes which often tend to be prescriptive, integrated activities in programmes often tend to originate from the bottom up, arising from the inputs of all significant stakeholders. However,
activities in properly conceived academic programmes may also emanate from visionary and strategic institutional leadership to drive higher education change and transformation vis-à-vis curriculum transformation for social change. Service-learning implementation as an emerging practice (Castle & Osman 2003) cannot solely rely on limiting prescriptive strategies but may well also have to deal with chaos, survival and uncertainty — which is part and parcel of the changing nature of institutions seeking to engage in an increasingly participatory culture. Service-learning programmes will be no less exempted from the effects of the wave of innovation, knowledge explosion, information revolution and the globalisation of the economy than any other transformation attempts that impact on higher education curricula. Having been mandated to lead and manage the implementation of the emerging practice of service-learning in an environment of risk and uncertainty, higher education institutions will adopt nothing less than a thoroughly conceived and integrated mentoring programme as forming part of their overall management paradigm and not presented as a mere optional add-on. As the accompanying example of a diagrammatic representation of integrated mentoring shows, mentorship processes with and in communities are very much facilitated by and for the institutions on the one hand, and the development and learnings of students on the other. Feedback and evaluation of institutional inputs and student outputs can constantly be monitored and improved in terms of the demands of academic-social processes and community programmes which are operationalised in terms of strategic and integrated mentoring procedures.

CONCLUSION

To reach consensus in terms of a service-learning contract between students, communities and institutions it must be seen as forming an integral part of teaching and learning, for at the same time it would represent a ‘blueprint’ for the mentoring programme. The latter seeks to serve as a commitment of all to work together and as presenting a clear framework for mentoring and its monitoring of student learning in their development towards self-reliance. Direct monitoring of mentoring in service-learning programmes can be considered to be an important element of the institution’s plans and procedures for ensuring quality assurance and quality enhancement. Monitoring the mentoring in terms of peer feedback among students also assists institutional attempts to fill the gap in its own diverse quality procedures. This provides supplementary information alongside information from student feedback at course and module level. The information and feedback through mentoring procedures would usually be confidential to those students concerned and would not be used for purposes other than the genuine improvement of their personal development and professional practice. While the communities involved in service-learning would have benefited from the institution’s inputs, the institutional culture which would increasingly value the learnings of both students and staff, would also have been enhanced significantly. While institutions may
generally pay lip-service to the notion that people learn through doing — a practice which indeed fosters high quality learning (Nightingale & O’Neil 1997:57), the real test will be when it enhances even higher levels of quality learning if students were strategically mentored in a collaborative and empowering way to develop their competencies of excellence in academic as well as matters civic.

REFERENCES


