THE INEXTRICABLE LINK BETWEEN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH AND SERVICE LEARNING: THE CASE OF AN INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that international community-based research projects, embedded in university community engagement sites, offer a dynamic learning
environment. It further argues that community-based learning, community engagement and service learning should be seen as allied pillars of tertiary education, using an international community-based research project, Building Global Bridges, to demonstrate the value of this perspective. Drawing on the experiences of this project, that brought together students and faculty from the United States (US) and South Africa, the article outlines multi-tiered learning benefits for community members, students from both countries, and for faculty members. It concludes by suggesting that international collaborations that centre on community-based research and service learning within a community engagement context offer a beneficial framework for co-producing knowledge for higher education institutes more broadly.

Keywords: international cooperation in higher education, international exchange programmes, Study Abroad, internationalisation of teaching, learning and research, cross-border delivery of education

INTRODUCTION

As a student, you learn about research and other academic matters within a classroom setting, but with the Building Global Bridges Project we really got to put it into action in the field and in turn develop and solidify new skills of our own. And now I can actually see research and academia as a viable career option which is not just about being in an office space dealing with abstract issues, but working with real people and doing things that matter to them. (Thula Zungu)

Thula Zungu, quoted above, was a postgraduate student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). As the quote clearly articulates, his involvement in a community engaged research collaboration project between an American and a South African university gave him an enhanced sense of purpose and self – as a student (and potential academic) and as an active citizen.

In this article, we argue that international community-based research projects, embedded in university community engagement sites, offer a dynamic learning environment. This is an environment that develops students’ research capacity, and disciplinary specific skills and knowledge, simultaneously growing their sense of global citizenship and cultural competency. At the root of the article is the belief that community engagement, community-based research and service learning should be viewed as interconnected.

The Building Global Bridges (BGB) Project to which Zungu refers brought together five post-graduate students from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in the United States (US) and five post-graduate students from UKZN in South Africa. Four of the five UKZN students were community development graduates, while the fifth, Zungu, was a graduate of media and communications. The VCU students were from a variety of fields including media studies, public health, psychology,
and physiotherapy. This international team undertook a photovoice research project with school going youth within an already robust community engagement project in Durban, South Africa.

From the outset, it was intended that the BGB community-based learning process would use a community-engaged approach as this had greater potential for sustainability, ease of access and legitimacy. The authors of the article are faculty members who were directly involved in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the BGB Project, which, like all international education programmes, was very time consuming and required substantial planning and negotiation. However, for the most part, the project went ahead smoothly, and, as the article will demonstrate, its objectives were achieved. We believe that the success of this international student collaboration resulted from the early vision of locating the project within a community engagement context, careful planning, and openness to learning and service outcomes within the parameters of the project goals. As expected, challenges emerged during the course of the programme; these are reflected on in the final section of the article.

The broad aim of the BGB Project was two-fold, namely: to offer students from the two universities the opportunity to ‘do’ community-based research; and to build ‘cultural competence’ (Wright and Lundy 2012, 73). ‘Cultural competence’ is developed when learners from different parts of the world come together to exchange and explore global perspectives, cross-cultural communication skills, and intercultural competence (Leask 2013, 105). In recent years, cultural competency and active citizenship have become a desired educational outcome for many higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe. Internationalising the curriculum, study abroad programmes and international research collaborations are all part of the implementation of this goal, albeit with contested and uneven results.

The BGB Project was structured in such a way that it provided students with a real world context in which to conduct research and enhance the ‘tools of their trade’ within an international community context. While this project was not conceived of as a service learning project, service learning was an important ‘spin off’. Through their participation, students were able to sharpen their specific disciplinary knowledge and skills whether as future community development specialists, psychologists, photographers or public health professionals. The service learning outcome was not surprising given, we believe, the inextricable link between community-based learning, community engagement and service learning. As Stoecker et al. (2010) argue, outcome-based service learning often emerges from community-based research. However, it should be noted that we use the term ‘service learning’ somewhat loosely – non-traditionally perhaps – to refer to learnings resulting from service provision that are directly aligned with disciplinary or professional study and growth.
We begin the article by examining the state of community engagement within universities; particularly in South Africa given that the BGB Project was located within a community engagement project in a localised community in Durban, South Africa. The article then turns to the BGB Project as a means of demonstrating the connection between these arguably allied pillars of tertiary education, namely, community-based learning, community engagement and service learning. We explore how the outcomes for all parties were greatly enhanced as a result of the international collaboration that was core to the project. The article concludes with some reflections on how international collaborations between universities may more broadly optimise the ‘service learning’ outcomes that arose from our involvement in the BGB Project.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, SERVICE LEARNING AND CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGMS OF KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

In recent decades, and across the world, community engagement has increasingly been viewed as an important pillar of university scholarship (Knox 2001). Greater emphasis on community engagement has resulted from a variety of ‘push factors’. These include growing accountability demands from national (education) legislators with regard to meeting public needs; community demands for more constructive links between universities and communities; and a shift in philosophies of learning from an expert model to a more collaborative model (Weerts and Sandmann 2008). Most university mission statements in South Africa and the US now include a strong commitment to community engagement, alongside teaching and research.

In South Africa, community engagement is promoted as part of universities’ post-apartheid transformation agenda (Hall 2010; Lazarus et al. 2008). In 1997, the then Minister of Education stated that along with teaching and research, universities are required 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’ (DoE 1997, 10). The Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997) provided for the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). The HEQC identifies ‘knowledge-based community service’ as part of the requirements for programme accreditation, as outlined in Criterion 18 of its institutional audit guidelines (CHE 2004). According to the Act, community engagement, and teaching and learning should be considered as three inter-related components of university life (Lazarus et al. 2008).

While South African national policy on university community engagement seems impressive, the legacy that favours the primacy of traditional (classroom-based) teaching and research persists (O’Brien 2009), leading Hall (2010) to conclude that community engagement is the ‘orphan’ of South African higher education policy. As
a formalised objective or ‘pillar’ of university life, community engagement is fairly new to South African universities. Community engagement programmes are often ad-hoc, with little attention being given to philosophical and pedagogical processes and outcomes (O’Brien 2009). They remain fragmented, under-developed and poorly supported in terms of infrastructure, funding and recognition. In some South African universities community engagement only exists on paper. This lack of conceptual clarity has seriously hampered the ‘doing’ of community engagement (Kruss 2012), blurring much needed understanding of its inter-relatedness to service learning and community-based research.

In 1998, the Joint Education Trust (JET) conducted a survey on community engagement in South African Higher Education (Hall 2010). It found that while most HEIs in South Africa included community engagement in their mission statement, very few had an explicit policy or strategy to operationalise this. Where projects and programmes did exist, they were usually initiated by innovative academic staff and students, rather than resulting from a deliberate institutional strategy or philosophy that stresses community engagement as a core function of the academy (Lazarus et al. 2008, 60).

Very few South African universities appear to take the view that community engagement is integrally linked to research and teaching endeavours. In 2008, an audit report noted that:

... some institutions had done no more than conduct internal audits or compile inventories of ongoing community engagement activities. There were few databases available and no monitoring systems. Community engagement was sometimes driven by volunteerism, and foreign students were queuing up to come to South Africa to involve themselves in community engagement. The activities were generally decentralised, and it was difficult to find a Senate committee that was responsible for community engagement. This does not mean that there were no institutions with a more coherent and structured approach to community engagement, but those were in the minority. Where there were structures in place, they were trying to develop policies on, and criteria for, community engagement. There was minimal funding for community engagement, and the funding that was available generally fell within the realm of partnerships. (Lange in Hall 2010, 5)

This report paints a somewhat dismal picture. There is no central Community Engagement Office at UKZN (U. Bob, pers. comm., April 2014), and no funding is targeted for community engagement projects. This is despite the fact that UKZN has committed itself ‘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’ (http://www.ukzn.ac.za/about-ukzn/vision-and-mission).

However, it is important to note that South African universities such as UKZN are not alone in regard to the lack of coherence, commitment and certainty in carrying through their stated mission of community engagement. Douglas (2012),
a board member of the Australian Universities’ Community Engagement Alliance, argues that, internationally, the scholarship of engagement remains peripheral to the academic enterprise. A similar point is made by Hall (2010) in her study of tertiary education in the US.

Both Hall and Douglas maintain that the lack of a well-defined and generally accepted conceptualisation of the term community engagement is at the root of the problem. Both words in this term are indeterminate. While the term ‘community’ is highly contested (Kruss 2012), in the broadest sense it refers to a space that is not the state or the commercial market. Community, in this view, can, and does mean anything from a university’s own staff and students, to a community of practice, and civic organisations and groupings. The breadth of this definition can be either helpful or formidable. Nonetheless, it provides scope for where community engagement programmes can legitimately be conducted. Community-based research and service are best conducted within a community engagement context, where partnerships exist between communities and universities, and where outcomes and service requirements have already been deliberated.

The term ‘engagement’ is an equally challenging one that, when interrogated, opens up a rich vein of inquiry into the nature of knowledge itself. How a person ‘engages’ is a subject of much debate involving contested theories, principles and practices. Hall (2010, 7) offers a broad working definition of community engagement as a:

... cluster of activities that include service learning, problem-based teaching and research that addresses specific wants and needs, the pursuit of alternative forms of knowledge and challenges to established authorities that control and direct research systems and the allocation of qualifications.

It is instructive to note that the various components of this definition include service learning, outcome-based research and alternate understandings of where knowledge and expertise lie.

‘Engagement’, in this view, differs from ‘outreach’, since the notion of ‘outreach’ (reaching out) holds within it a sense of charity and philanthropy (Weerts and Sandmann 2008). Engagement, on the other hand, emphasises a two-way approach in which institutions and the ‘community’ collaborate in developing and applying knowledge and skills to address societal needs (Weerts and Sandmann 2010, 1). Thus, the community is a central actor in creating knowledge and designing research, as well as in defining what services might result from community engagement and community-based research. In a community engagement process, both students (and the university more broadly) and ‘the community’ should ideally be partners in an engagement program, and should benefit from it. Similarly, Stoecker et al. (2010) argue that service learning should benefit both students and the community, but should emerge from a process of engagement and community-based research.
For community engagement programmes to be constructive and mutually beneficial, both partners in the engagement process (community and university) need to be viewed, and view each other, as having valuable assets, knowledge and resources (Douglas 2012). Community engagement depends on processes of research that fundamentally challenge the notion that universities are the bearers and producers of knowledge (Weerts and Sandmann 2008). As a result, research that takes place within a community engaged framework emphasises co-determination between university and community actors in formulating research questions, and the design of research, as well as determining and assessing potential outcomes (such as service) that might emerge from the research process. Thus conceived, research could best be regarded as community-based research which, ideally, ‘is controlled by the people experiencing the issue rather than by outside technical experts’ (Stoecker et al. 2010, 283).

Knowledge produced through engagement is often outcome oriented and thus linked to community oriented service provision. It would seem then that community engagement (including community-based learning) offers the best starting point or guide for service learning (Douglas 2012). Service learning in a community engagement setting broadens students’ understanding of their discipline, profession and the wider community. As Vickers, Harris and McCarthy (2004) argue, this is because students engaged in this type of service learning gain invaluable insight into the significant socio-cultural, political and economic issues that impact their field of future work (or profession) as well as the society in which their work is embedded. Embedding service learning in a community engagement setting offers students the opportunity to develop contextualised knowledge, skills and strategies, together with community partners, in order to address real world problems in adaptive and iterative ways.

When community-based research and service is couched within a community engagement context, it is experienced (and received) by all parties as driven by community needs rather than educational or policy imperatives. This is very different from the way in which most university-based service learning is currently practised in South African and American universities. South African scholars, Mouton and Wildschut (2005), argue that for the most part service learning is experienced by students as a compulsory, top-down and imposed part of the curriculum. In the American context, service learning is experienced by students as ad-hoc, and the short time that is generally allocated to ‘service learning’ leaves them feeling disconnected from communities, while communities often feel hostile towards students who have little understanding of their needs and internal resourcefulness (Eyler 2002; Stoecker et al. 2010).

‘Service’ and community-based research feed into community engagement in very direct ways. Engagement is the fulcrum around which a wide range of university activities can take place. In this model, the ‘community’ is a space of
learning, teaching and research, underpinned by participatory and outcome oriented approaches. If embedded as partners within communities, students quickly learn, through action, that professional knowledge is critical but does not fit all situations; they make sense of their professional or disciplinary knowledge while at the same time learning to respond to situations that are uncertain and unique. This type of learning promotes students’ understanding that being effective as practitioners and professionals requires going beyond the rules. It requires new ways of framing problems, and interrogating what is learned through more traditional university teaching programmes.

If it is to be assumed that all disciplines and professions are in one way or another about diagnosis, design and problem solving, it is important to determine where designing and problem solving is best learned. Arguably, this is not in the classroom, but rather in practical domains. Community engagement projects then become sites of praxis and reflexivity. However, being reflexive and getting practice ‘right’ are not easy to achieve. Amongst other things, it requires good coaching from university teachers and community partners (Eyler 2002), including the development of well-constructed tools for reflection (Wright and Lundy 2012). Its success is also dependent on recognition and direct support from universities to students and faculty involved in community-based learning, research and service.

The following section of the article examines the BGB Project, as an example of a community-based research programme, embedded within a community engagement project that had ‘service-learning’ outcomes. We received ethical approval from both institutions to conduct this research and all participants (youth and students) gave their consent for their materials to be used for research purposes. We also demonstrate the importance of international collaborations in achieving both broad and specific tertiary educational goals. In the pages to follow, we unpack what made this project work, but also what institutional, scholarly and pedagogical learning emerged from this experience.

THE BUILDING GLOBAL BRIDGES PROJECT

As noted in the introduction, the BGB Project brought together students from two very different parts of the world, Virginia in the US and Durban in South Africa, to collaborate on a community-engaged research project within a community engagement context. One of the key goals of VCU’s strategic plan, Quest for Distinction, is international research, faculty and student collaborations and the university has identified UKZN as one of its strategic international partners (http://www.quest.vcu.edu/). Another key goal of Quest for Distinction is to support and promote community-engaged research as well as service learning. VCU has a strong and successful Division of Community Engagement that includes the Office of Service Learning (http://www.community.vcu.edu/). To support both the partnership
as well as strategic university-wide goals, funding for the BGB Project was provided by the VCU International Partnership Initiatives Award. The implementation of the project took place over an intense four-week period from July to August 2013. The BGB Project was embedded within the Kenneth Gardens Community (KGC) Project.

Kenneth Gardens is Durban’s largest municipal housing estate located in the lower middle class/working class suburb of Umbilo. The 282 units that make up Kenneth Gardens were built in 1948 to provide subsidised housing to poor ‘white’ families. Today the estate is a transformed place, where diverse families and individuals share a geographic space and similar socio-economic circumstances. The estate suffers from building disrepair (a fairly recent phenomenon) and is beleaguered with a range of social problems, such as alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment and domestic violence (many of which have plagued the estate since its inception). Furthermore, a high proportion of families care for family members with chronic illnesses or serious physical or mental disabilities.

The KGC Project, a partnership project between two HEIs, namely, UKZN and the Durban University of Technology (DUT), has been up and running on the estate since 2011. Strong links exist between the UKZN Community Development Department, DUT and the residents of Kenneth Gardens, with a range of partnered service and research programmes underway. The suite of programmes within this broader project range from the provision of a free weekly homeopathy clinic and food nutrition support, to a bursary programme, as well as dance, capoeira and digital media projects aimed at the youth. The research component of the project comprises the production of an oral history of residents of Kenneth Gardens, as well as impact and assessment research with regard to the ‘service’ projects. The community service and research components of the KGC Project were well established by the time the BGB Project was conceived and organised.

At the core of the BGB Project was the photovoice research that paired UKZN/VCU student teams with high school learners who lived on the estate. Thirteen high school students from Kenneth Gardens who attend Brettonwood High School were involved in the project. Brettonwood High School is a feeder school for Kenneth Gardens’ scholars and is widely regarded an underperforming school (academically), with a student body from disadvantaged communities. Working with high school youth directly touched on community concerns, expressed in a range of community forums and in the oral histories that had been constructed. There is a general worry within Kenneth Gardens, including among young adults, that youngsters from the community are likely to fall into the trap of drug and alcohol abuse and poor school performance if not provided with positive role-models and exposure to new skills and opportunities.

The Grade 10–12 Kenneth Gardens learners from Brettonwood High School who opted to participate in the project were viewed as ‘at risk’ students by the school authorities. This was relayed to the UKZN team by the principal during the
first meeting to discuss the photovoice project. Despite the negative views held by the school authorities and teachers, from the outset, the VCU/UKZN team was determined not to label these young people, but chose rather to see them as bearers of knowledge and skills that had most likely been hidden and unacknowledged. The Brettonwood learners from Kenneth Gardens were very excited to be given the chance to work closely with university students (both local and international), and to tell their ‘stories’ through photographs and accompanying narratives.

In line with community identified needs, the photovoice project aimed to give voice to the young school students who reside in Kenneth Gardens, while at the same time facilitating knowledge exchange between the three groupings involved in the project, namely, the Brettonwood students, and the UKZN and VCU students. Through the photovoice project, these three groups came together to explore the significant people, places and things in the Kenneth Gardens community from young people’s perspectives. They were also asked to identify and explain the challenges and facilitators of well-being in the Kenneth Gardens Community.

Photovoice is a participatory research method in which participants are agents of data collection and are intimately involved in critically reflecting and analysing the data (Dixon and Hadjialexiou 2005; Findholt, Michael and Davis 2011; Mosavel and Sanders 2010). It is ideally suited to community engagement projects in many ways and positions community members as ‘resident experts’. This conceptual framing places photovoice within the shared knowledge building paradigm discussed earlier. Together with community members (i.e., the Brettonwood students) university students became co-constructors of knowledge. Together, they conducted research on questions that had not previously been answered by young residents of Kenneth Gardens. Photovoice workshops were organised and basic photography training was given to all participants, including the university faculty and students involved in the BGB Project. Brettonwood students were paired with UKZN/VCU student mentorship teams. Over a three-week period, they were mentored by the university students in the collection of data through taking pictures and the development of relevant captions and narratives. These photos and narratives were analysed by a combined team led by the university students. The analysis processes initially took place in teams and later all participants came together in a large group to deliberate on the photos, their meaning and how they could be presented.

The BGB Project concluded with three exhibitions. The first took place at a high level university forum at UKZN, in which the university mentorship teams presented their experiences. The second took place at Brettonwood High, where students presented their experiences and photos to community members and school staff. The third exhibition was held at a well-known art gallery in Durban, the KwaZulu-Natal Art Gallery (KZNSA). At the request of the school, the photos are now permanently mounted in its media centre.
The photovoice project had very positive outcomes for the Brettonwood learners. They gained enormous confidence in their ability to talk about their lives and their community through the use of photographs and narratives. Many commented that, for the first time, they felt that they had a ‘space’ to be heard, especially by school teachers, fellow learners and the school authorities. Both teachers and the principal of the school openly expressed how inspired they were at the high level of analysis and understanding the learners showed. They acknowledged in a public forum at the university that they had always viewed the learners from Kenneth Gardens as incapable, problematic and unlikely to succeed. After listening, for the first time, to the depth of knowledge and insight that these learners displayed through their photos and narratives, they confessed how ‘ashamed’ they were to have overlooked these learners’ capabilities. Prior to the photovoice project, these youth were given few, if any, opportunities to ‘prove themselves good’. In recognition of the knowledge built and shared by the school learners who participated in the photovoice project, the principal of the school arranged a special assembly at which the young learners presented their exhibition to the whole school and received certificates of merit for their work.

For all the young people, this was their first experience of public speaking, enabled by ongoing mentoring and encouragement from the university students. For the final year Brettonwood students involved in the project, this experience generated an interest in tertiary education, something to which they had previously paid scant attention. The university students from the US and South Africa proved inspirational role models. All three of the final year students have now successfully accessed various tertiary programmes or have signed up for extra courses to ensure access next year. Through the BGB Project, Kenneth Gardens’ youth formed links with university students – both local and American – adding in very significant ways to their social and cultural capital. While this outcome is significant in itself, we now focus on the impact of this photovoice project on the students from VCU and UKZN.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BGB PROJECT FOR THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

The outcomes of the research process, that is, the research outputs of the photovoice process, were an important end result. Through their international partnership, the students facilitated a process whereby younger school-going youth were able to generate data, from the bottom up, about their lives in Kenneth Gardens. The tangible outcome of the photovoice process gave the university students from across the globe a profound sense of having provided a service to the Kenneth Gardens youth they had worked so closely with throughout the project.

The project also enabled university students to move into a critical reflexive space. The VCU students had to think very carefully about doing research in a
‘strange’ context. These inward reflections led to a range of fascinating outward discussions between the students from the two universities about research ethics, insider-outsider researcher identities, language barriers, and the complexities of doing research in a resource challenged environment. The South African students, while in their own country, learned with their peers from VCU that they too had to learn the nuances of a local community that was not their own, although of course the cultural distance was far smaller than for the VCU students.

Throughout the project, the students from both universities were reminded that they were not the sole bearers of knowledge or expertise, nor could they provide solutions to problems without the input of those confronting particular problems. The Brettonwood students and other Kenneth Gardens residents had significant knowledge to share about well-being, governance, education, and even about how to take photos and narrate life stories. Arguably the most tangible outcomes were the ways in which this group of graduate students were able to reconceptualise their own positionality and assumptions as researchers within a community setting. Furthermore, as many of their reflections demonstrate, they were acutely aware that community-based research, particularly in an unknown space, is best done within a robust community engagement setting. Residents welcomed the students to Kenneth Gardens because of the strong links that UKZN already had in the community. Indeed, community members facilitated the research process and supported university and school students when they conducted the research (through the photographs), and when they exhibited. Being embedded in a community engagement setting, facilitated socio-cultural, political and economic literacy and awareness among the students (Vickers et al. 2004), allowing for greater sensitivity in data collection and analysis.

The bringing together of students from different parts of the world created a real sense of excitement and curiosity from the outset that bolstered the research process. Students learned, through their international collaboration, that even a seemingly simple ethical issue such as informed consent is highly contested and fluid. Gaining informed consent in communities whose residents’ first language is not English and where filling in forms is seen as taking away rights rather than reinforcing them, was eye-opening for students whose understanding of research ethics had been derived from books and from the ticking of forms required by universities. Ethics came to life in the doing of research as teams from two geographically distant places.

Robust debate between the two student groupings emerged in ethics seminars, and in debriefing sessions. While initially somewhat intimidated, the South African students soon began to participate in group discussions as actively as their US counterparts. In doing so, they came to realise that their own knowledge base, which they previously viewed as inferior, was in fact rich, and this boosted their confidence. Students from both universities became aware of opportunities for study abroad. Indeed, two of the VCU students intend to further their studies in Durban, while at
least one of the South African university students has expressed interest in doing a master’s or doctoral degree in the US.

We noted earlier in the article that the BGB Project gave rise to a form of service learning as an unintended ‘spin-off’ of this community-based research project. Through the photovoice project, Kenneth Gardens youth learned new skills which they highly valued. In imparting these skills, the university students came to understand more about how to work with community members, as partners. This learning is relevant to all professions and disciplines. The university students came to learn more about their disciplinary and professional fields through the ‘service’ they provided to the youth of Kenneth Gardens. While the BGB Project was not linked to any particular module that the students were completing as part of a course requirement, being part of the project created opportunities for students from both universities to build knowledge in their field of study whether in psychology, photography, community development or occupational therapy. Since they were embedded in the Kenneth Gardens community, they were able to share their specific disciplinary and professional knowledge and skills with residents, in particular the Brettonwood students. As a result, the traditional academic curriculum that the students had undergone in their respective courses and universities was infused with greater relevance.

All of the students learned to become better researchers, an important outcome for a graduate student regardless of discipline. The one month project which brought together the three groups of learners was very structured. The university students participated actively in a range of research methodology workshops and discussions ranging from conducting interviews, to (contested) research ethics, and photovoice. These methodological workshops and deliberations were organised by academic staff from both VCU and UKZN. The university students were also involved in a number of ongoing reflection exercises. These included writing daily personal journals, and regular web blogging.

In addition, team debriefing and discussion sessions were held regularly throughout the project, providing a space for the students to talk through and reflect on, their in-field research experiences. The daily personal journals and blogs were a compulsory component of the project for the VCU students. This was not the case for the UKZN students who volunteered to be involved in this project over and above their course work which they were doing throughout the period of the BGB Project. The VCU students’ journal and blog entries spoke to their personal learnings, their deepened understandings of community dynamics, and how they had enhanced their disciplinary and skills knowledge base through the BGB Project. Without reflection, service learning may become a ‘feel good’ exercise with no link to curriculum or content or to the unsorted realities that experience brings to the fore (Vickers et al. 2004).
The discussion sessions which the BGB team (both students and faculty) participated in became an important vehicle to work through praxis dilemmas and achievements. For many of the students, although not all, this was their first experience of carrying out sustained research in the field. It was also their first experience of being embedded within a community setting. Students from very different parts of the world, from a range of disciplines, had an opportunity to engage with the tensions of doing community-based research while providing a real service to the community. In reflection sessions they were able to deliberate on significant issues such as power relationships between researcher and participants; intra-community politics; and how to ask questions in ways that are situationally appropriate.

The BGB Project proved to be a learning experience far removed from the standard tradition of university classroom teaching that continues to dominate South African universities. It allowed for learning through doing, as collaborators. In written and group reflections, students from both universities stated that their motivation to learn was boosted by the project. They attributed this to three dimensions of the project, namely: the fact that learning took place in a community engagement setting; the opportunity for learning and doing with peers from across the globe; and the structured and guided nature of the project.

In large part, the success of the BGB Project lay in the planning, context and skills orientation, training, supervision and evaluation that were carefully woven into the project. We learned that these are essential components of community-based learning and successful service learning experiences. This level of organisation and orientation requires significant investment of time and resources, as well as commitment from university faculty involved (Spencer-Oatey 2012, 257). Success with regard to the international exchange was the result of forging strong collaboration between all team members (faculty and students from both universities) prior to the project that was maintained throughout. A year’s worth of joint planning around proposal writing, budgeting, learning and reflection programmes was vital to the success of the BGB Project. This intense level of planning and collaborative work across boundaries is exhausting. The sustainability and success of programmes like the BGB require universities to provide adequate support and recognition to both staff and students (Spencer-Oatey 2012). It also requires a significant cultural shift for most university actors who are much more comfortable with knowledge exchange as one-way and with ‘pure’ rather than applied (or action) research (Weerts and Sandmann 2008).

**REFLECTIONS AND LEARNINGS FROM THE BGB PROJECT**

There is no doubt that the BCB Project was an opportunity for multi-directional knowledge building and knowledge exchange (Bringle and Hatcher 2002). The project
demonstrated that knowledge flows between partners often occur in unexpected ways. University students learned as much from community members, particularly the Brettonwood students, as community members learned from university staff and students. Students from both universities came to understand the importance of being sensitive to context and the importance of collaboration.

The photos and the narratives, as well as the thoroughly planned process of learning and teaching photovoice, dramatically shifted the understandings and assumptions of university actors. School learners who had been written off by their own institution (i.e., the school) came to be seen as knowledge producers and responsible citizens. From being viewed as ill-disciplined and incompetent, they were hailed as role models in their community and school context. The photos, narratives and captions produced by the Brettonwood learners demonstrated that they had deep insight into the dynamics of their local community and their own wellness possibilities as part of this community. They uncovered places, people and things that were significant, yet were previously hidden from view. No interview, survey or any other traditional research tool could have rendered information that was so textured and meaningful.

Being part of the broader KGC Project in itself enhanced the service learning process. We believe that participating students were able to see the link between community-based research, community engagement and learning while providing a service. As O’Brein (2009) correctly points out, service learning within a community engagement context provides an opportunity for students to learn in ways that are both reflexive and practical. The community engagement context also countered ‘the isolation of learning from experience and the artificial division of subject matter into disconnected disciplines … it provides opportunities for students to form bonds with each other, with faculty, and with community members while undertaking worthwhile projects’ (Eyler 2002, 517). The BGB Project created a greater sense of citizenship through improving the lives of others by providing a service (Bringle and Hatcher 2000; Hall 2010). For the BGB participants, citizenship came to be understood beyond the confines of their individual national identity or location.

The article has demonstrated, in part that service learning (broadly defined), community-based research and community engagement are not easily separated from one another. Nor should they be. Together they provide universities with a mechanism to facilitate knowledge exchange, deepen disciplinary/professional knowledge, and build sensibilities of citizenship. If we accept this, there is good reason for universities to invest (in multitude ways) in processes and programmes that ‘build reciprocal, enduring and diverse partnerships that mutually support community interests and academic goals’ (Bringle and Hatcher 2000, 275).
Some of these structural barriers can be broken down by creating more flexible and permeable university governance structures that encourage trust and power sharing (Weerts and Sandmann 2008). Whether cultural shifts occur and structural barriers are removed depends, to a large extent, on university leadership (at the executive and intermediate levels) and policy. International collaborations centred on community-based research and service learning within a community engagement context offer multi-tiered learning benefits; for community members, students from both countries, and faculty members. Within this framework, co-producing knowledge offers new learnings not just for community members, students and faculty but also for higher education institutes more broadly.

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NOTE

1. See Mitchell, Stuart, Moletsane and Nkwanyana (2006, 275) on how photovoice projects with young participants can also offer learnings on ‘citizenship and democracy’.

REFERENCES


CHE see Council on Higher Education.


DoE see Department of Education.


