

Partnerships and Power: Community Partners' Experiences of Service-Learning

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Abstract

Service-learning is a form of community engagement deemed beneficial to both students and community members. However, while there is a large and growing body of research investigating whether service-learning does indeed advance student learning, there has been paucity of research on whether service-learning benefits community partners, and in what way. This study is based on interviews with community partners at a South African university, to explore how community partners experience service-learning. The findings suggest that community partners value service-learning partnerships and believe that the presence of students does, for the most part, meet a need in the community. However, the findings also show that service-learning partners long for greater commitment and attention from the university partner, and that few partners feel empowered to initiate and drive service-learning partnerships, which are instead typically set up by the university. These findings also suggest that service-learning partnerships are of value to partners, but that more needs to be done to address the power relations inherent in partnerships between universities and community partners.

Keywords: service-learning; community partners; community engagement; community development; volunteer tourism

Introduction

A few years ago, I introduced a service-learning component into a postgraduate course. The service-learning component led to vigorous debates among my students in relation to a range of issues. One issue that students discussed at length was whether or not the service-learning initiative (and community engagement initiatives more generally) were a form of “poverty tourism.” “Poverty tourism” is a term used to critique attempts by



relatively privileged people to go into poorer communities with a view to help them in some way, but also with the (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) intention of providing an enriching or rewarding experience for the privileged “helpers.” Some of my students felt that service-learning courses are (or risk being) a form of tourism that does little to help poorer communities, whose poverty is being gazed upon by the relatively privileged in a way that satisfies the needs of the privileged, while undermining the dignity of those in the targeted communities.

These concerns stimulated much reflection and quite some distress on my part as I had hoped that the service-learning initiative would be a meaningful way both to improve my students’ learning and promote community development. In response to these concerns—as well as other wider concerns, discussed below, about the need for more research on how community partners experience service-learning, I initiated a modest research project aimed at determining how community partners involved in service-learning initiatives experience such initiatives. This article discusses the findings of my research, with the aim of contributing to broader discussions on whether and how service-learning can be used for the mutual benefit of university students and communities outside the university. While the article is based on research conducted at one particular institution based in South Africa, the findings are relevant to any educational institution attempting to promote community development through service-learning.

Goals and Methods

The goal of the research was to find out how service-learning partners experience service-learning, whether and how they benefit from it, and how service-learning partnerships can be designed to optimally meet the needs of the community. The research adopted a qualitative method, because the goal was to better understand the experiences of community partners who participate in service-learning, rather than measure or in some other way, quantify their experiences. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of community partners, I conducted semi-structured interviews with as many of my institution’s service-learning community partners as possible. On attaining a list of current service-learning partners from the university’s community engagement division, I spoke to all the partners who were available and willing to be interviewed. The willing partners numbered 10 in total. Given that the number of community partners involved in service-learning at the institution at any given time is relatively small (less than 20),¹ this meant that I interviewed a good proportion of the institution’s partners. These interviews were open-ended, making it

1 It is difficult to determine with certainty the number of service-learning initiatives being undertaken at any given time. While RUCE encourages lecturers to coordinate their involvement through their office, but it is possible that some lecturers have introduced service-learning components without organising them through RUCE. I focused on the service-learning partners currently working in partnerships known to RUCE staff members, which numbered fewer than 20 currently active partnerships.

easy for me to best explore how community partners experience service-learning. In terms of the analysis of the interview material, thematic analysis was used to identify key themes emerging from the interviews. Ethical clearance for the research was granted by my institution before the interviews were conducted. Interviewees' anonymity was guaranteed to make it easier for them to speak openly about their experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This article approaches service-learning from the perspective of a critical service-learning approach as articulated by authors such as Butin (2007, 2015) and Mitchell (2008). This approach to service-learning seeks to create links between service-learning and social justice education, bringing together two traditions, which both “link the personal to the social and the classroom to the community” (Butin 2007, 117). In explaining a critical service-learning approach, Mitchell (2008, 50) distinguishes between “traditional” service-learning and “critical” service learning. The former approach encourages students to perform a service to the community, but does not push them to reflect critically on the larger systems of oppression, which create the inequalities, which result in the need for the service concerned. In contrast, critical service-learning encourages students to explore larger questions related to inequality and injustice. Furthermore, whereas traditional service-learning tends to focus on the educational needs of students, critical service-learning foregrounds the needs of the community concerned (Mitchell 2008, 52). Therefore, from a critical service-learning perspective, service-learning ought not to aim principally to meet an educational need of the student, but should rather involve the student in activism towards social justice. Consequently, critical service-learning is not directed towards a specified and predetermined end-goal, but is much more open-ended and encourages questioning and debate (Butin 2007, 180). Given the goal of this research, which was to explore the experiences of community partners involved in service-learning, it made sense to adopt a theoretical approach that foregrounds the needs of the communities involved in service-learning and that positions service-learning within larger debates about oppression and injustice.

Service-learning and Community Engagement

Before we continue with the discussion, it would be helpful to outline what service-learning is, and how it fits into the broader category of community engagement. Service-learning is one of the ways in which universities engage with their communities. Other forms of engagement include student volunteering, community-based research, university-community partnerships, internships and fieldwork (Furco 1996, 10–12). Some of these forms of engagements (such as student volunteership) place the meeting of community needs at the forefront with any learning on the part of the student, which is seen as fairly incidental. Other forms of engagements (such as internships) foreground the meeting of students' needs, with the students' involvement in the community being principally arranged to facilitate their learning. Service-learning fits somewhere in-

between in the sense that it combines the achievement of educational goals with the meeting of community needs.

In practice, it is not so easy to clearly delineate between these different forms of engagement, but it is fair to say that in order for an activity to qualify as service-learning it should have clear educational goals and be intended to meet a community need. Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) provide a clear description, arguing that service learning entails “the accomplishment of tasks that meet genuine human needs in combination with conscious educational growth.” Bringle and Hatcher’s (1995, 112) more comprehensive definition describes service learning as:

a credit-bearing educational experience where students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the activity so as to gain further understanding of course content, broaden their appreciation of the discipline and enhance a sense of civic responsibility.

A much more concise definition is provided by Butin (2010, xiv) who defines service learning as “the linkage of academic work with community-based engagement within a framework of respect, reciprocity, relevance and reflection.” What these definitions all emphasise is that service-learning has two key components: it must involve some kind of learning experience and the provision of a service of some kind to a community of people outside of the classroom.

As indicated earlier, community engagement (and service-learning as one component of it) is receiving increasing attention globally. In the United States of America, Ernst Boyer’s (1990) Carnegie Report played an important role in widening understanding of what scholarship is, in such a way that community engagement came to be understood as an important component of a university’s activities. In Africa, there has long been a debate about the appropriate relationship between the university and the broader local and national community. As a result, the idea of an engaged university is much more familiar in Africa than it may be in some parts of the world. The roles and responsibilities of the post-colonial university have always been a site of much contention and the notion of a detached, “ivory tower” university has been very hard to defend in post-colonial Africa. For this reason, it is unsurprising that many African universities have officially recognised and institutionalised community engagement. This increased commitment is reflected in the increase in the number of African universities that have joined the international Talloires Network, which promotes community engagement across the world.

The immediate post-apartheid era in South Africa was, perhaps, a particularly favourable context for the emergence of a concern with community engagement. The end of apartheid meant that the South African higher education system was trying to find new relevance just at the time when the notion of community engagement was increasing in prominence. Consequently, community engagement has come to feature

as a core function of post-apartheid higher education, at least in terms of policy (see Lazarus et al. 2008). In 2004, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) further reaffirmed its commitment to community engagement when it included community engagement among the criteria used for institutional audits (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2007).

My own institution, Rhodes University, has a long history of engaging in some way with its surrounding communities. The university is situated in Makhanda (also known as Grahamstown), a small town in the Eastern Cape, which is one of the poorest of South Africa's nine provinces. The university is situated on the west side of town, close to two elite private boarding schools. Most people in the town live on the eastern side in areas riddled with poverty and high levels of unemployment. The university's long-standing attempts to respond in some way to the stark inequalities, which characterise the town culminated in the establishment of the Rhodes University Community Engagement Division (RUCE) in 2010. The division runs a student volunteer programme and also provides support for other forms of community engagement, such as service-learning. Community engagement has received formal recognition in the institution through the awarding of annual awards for community engagement, and by being included as a criterion for promotion. The student volunteer programme is fairly large; considering the size of the institution—in 2017 there were 400 active student volunteers out of a university student population of around 8000 (Hornby 2017, email correspondence). This number excludes the additional number of students involved in community engagement through service-learning initiatives. The approach to community engagement, adopted by RUCE emphasises the integration of community engagement into the other aspects of university life. Rather than seeing community engagement as an activity separate from our teaching and research, academics at Rhodes University are encouraged to integrate community engagement into their teaching and research. Service-learning is an ideal way in which integration can be achieved, as it involves introducing some form of community engagement into a learning experience, rather than introducing it separately from academic activities. However, the number of service-learning programmes remains fairly small in any given year—for instance, there are fewer than 20 service-learning programmes implemented at the institution. Nevertheless, great emphasis on community engagement institutionally, nationally, and internationally means that the number of service-learning programmes are likely to increase (both at Rhodes University and elsewhere), making it all the more important to understand how community partners experience these programmes.

(Lack of) Research about Community Partner Experiences of Service-learning

As the above definitions suggest, for an activity to qualify as service-learning it ought to meet a specific need in a community outside the educational institution, and should facilitate students' learning. What is up for contestation is whether or not particular

activities described as service-learning actually do facilitate students' learning—and whether these activities really promote community development. We cannot assume that students learn through service-learning; simply because we hope or expect that they will. Likewise, having the intention to respond to a need of a particular community does not guarantee that a particular initiative will actually benefit that particular community. Research is needed to determine whether the manner in which service-learning is implemented indeed achieves what it is purported to achieve. Fortunately, many of those who have implemented service-learning initiatives are also engaged in ongoing research on these initiatives, and so there is a growing body of research on service-learning with key texts; including those by Bringle and Hatcher (2007), Eyler and Giles (1999), Stanton et al (1999) and Waterman (1997).

However, as pointed out by Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2000), there appears to be more research on how service-learning affects students' learning than there is on whether and how it meets the needs of the community. Writing in the North American context, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2000, 770) warn that there has been “a general lack of critical attention to the motivations, intentions, and outcomes of service-learning from the community perspective.” Similarly, but writing from the South African context, Oldfield (2008, 270) emphasises “the need to research rather than assume the ‘service’ in service-learning projects”; arguing that many practitioners of service-learning seem to simply assume that service learning benefits community partners (also see Mitchell and Humphries 2007). While some significant studies have been conducted on the perspective of the community on service-learning (see for example Sandy and Holland 2006), far more research has been conducted on the way in which university actors (such as students and faculty members) experience service-learning. For example, of the top 20 results from Google Scholar search on “service-learning”, 10 texts focus specifically on the experiences of students or the faculty during service learning; while none focus on community experiences (with the other 10 focusing neither specifically on the university or community perspective).² An EBSCO host search also yielded comparative results, with the top 20 articles on “service-learning” including 16 focusing on the effects of service-learning on students. There were no articles found on the effects of service-learning initiatives on the community partners.³ It seems clear that while there is a range of useful literature exploring whether and how service-learning can benefit students, there is, on the other hand, paucity of research on whether and how community partners benefit from participating in service-learning initiatives.

Cruz and Giles (2000) suggest a few reasons for this dearth of scholarship. They argue that the educational value of service-learning has been much contested within the academy, spurring on research that has aimed at proving or disproving that service-learning has valuable effects on students' learning. Because it was university authorities and peers, rather than community partners who questioned the value of service-learning,

2 This search was conducted in December 2018.

3 This search was conducted in December 2018.

and who had the power to prevent it from happening, advocates of service-learning had incentives to produce research to show the value of service-learning for universities and students (Schmidt and Robby 2002).

A further possible reason for the dearth of such scholarship is that it seems intuitive to many that community partners will benefit from having students involved in their programmes. However, critical writing on service-learning warns against such an assumption. Butin (2003, 1678) for example, is concerned that much service-learning is premised on the assumption that community transformation is achieved through “downward benevolence”, which entails powerful university actors assisting the less powerful. When this assumption is made, it is simply assumed that service-learning will benefit community partners. Bortolin (2011, 56) points out that the lack of research on service-learning actually undermines one of the goals of community engagement in that community engagement is supposed to disrupt the hierarchy whereby the needs of universities trump the needs of communities. If we are committed to benefiting community members, then our community engagement-related research should explore whether and how service-learning benefits communities. Without such research, there is little credibility to universities’ claims that service-learning is mutually beneficial and, once again, universities’ preferences and needs are being allowed to trump over those of the surrounding communities. Osman and Atwood (2007, 20) warn that we cannot have a situation where service-learning simply becomes an easy way for universities to “show-case” their interest in social responsibility without critically examining power relations between the university and community.

These kinds of concerns are also expressed in the growing literature critiquing so-called poverty tourism and volunteer tourism (see for example Odede 2010; Selinger 2009; Wearing 2003). While this research does not directly relate to service-learning, much of the critique on volunteer tourism is relevant to service-learning in the sense that it suggests that the attempts of privileged people to address the needs of marginalised communities sometimes work against the interests of the communities concerned, even while they are assumed to be for these communities’ benefit. According to Wearing (2003), volunteer tourism has grown dramatically in popularity; with increasing numbers of Western tourists choosing to embark on some kind of tourist activity that includes (or is principally composed of) volunteer work in an underprivileged community. As with literature on service-learning, Wearing (2003, 124) has found that there is less research on the experiences of communities supposedly being assisted by these volunteer projects than there is on the experiences of the volunteers themselves. Rather, it is simply assumed that communities concerned benefit from the attentions of privileged tourists. Critical commentators on volunteer tourism, such as Odede (2010) and Selinger (2009), argue that this kind of tourism potentially commodifies poverty and may undermine the dignity of those it is supposed to assist.

While service-learning is different from volunteer tourism, is it potentially open to similar accusations in the sense that it also involves sending out relatively privileged volunteers into poorer communities in a way that could potentially “serve up” the poverty of these communities for the education and edification of the volunteers without substantially improving the lives of those in these communities. Research into the experiences of community partners is necessary to ensure that this kind of commodification of poverty does not occur.

It is clear, then, that more research is needed on the experiences of community partners in service-learning initiatives. The lack of such research primarily motivated me to conduct the research discussed in this article. However, before delving into the findings of our research, it is important to acknowledge that there is a small body of a significantly valuable research on the topic, which makes it possible to compare the findings discussed below with existing literature on the ways in which community partners experience service-learning. Sandy and Holland’s (2006) study of 99 community partners, as well as Eyler, Giles, and Gray’s (1999) overview of literature on the effects of service-learning on students, faculty, institutions, and communities stand out as notable contributions. Small-scale studies, such as those by Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah (2016), as well as Schmidt and Robby (2002) are also welcome contributions to the fairly limited body of literature concerned with the experiences of community partners in service-learning. The above studies focused on service-learning in the United States of America (USA), but some of the research on this topic was conducted in South Africa too—see for example, Mitchell and Humphries (2007), Nduna (2007), Oldfield (2008) and Preece (2016).

An overview of this literature suggests that most community partners value the service-learning experience even when they may experience some challenges related to service-learning partnerships. Community partners interviewed expressed an appreciation for the services offered by students doing service-learning and indicated that they felt that the service provided was indeed helpful. For example, Sandy and Holland (2006, 35) note that students doing service-learning placements form a “critical part of the workforce of some partner organisations”. The students help sustain and extend the capacity of partner organisations and enable such organisations to take on new projects. Many community partners value the perspective and assistance of people outside their organisation. Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah (2016, 58, 62) assert that the community partners they interviewed valued the new ideas and the energy that students brought with them, while Nduna (2007, 73) notes that community partners valued the enthusiasm and commitment of the students.

Another benefit of service-learning that community partners frequently mentioned relates to ways in which service-learning can extend the networks of community partners and bring prospects for new opportunities for funding or accessing resources. For example, Davies (2016, 126) relates how an NGO working on issues related to

HIV/AIDS was able to use their service-learning partnership to open up new networks and gained access to epidemiologists who would assist them with the clinical aspects of their work. Community partners also value the less tangible networking-related benefits provided by service-learning in the sense that they make connections that they would usually not make. For example, Oldfield (2008, 281–282) notes that community partners appreciated the fact that service-learning initiatives “offer opportunities to develop friendships that, however short term, cross class, race, place and institutional boundaries.”

A further positive finding related to the experiences of community partners of service-learning is that many indicated that they found it satisfying to contribute to the lives of students and their learning. Sandy and Holland (2006, 34) assert that one of the most compelling findings of their study on the experiences of 99 community partners is the community partners’ “profound dedication to educating college students.” Community partners interviewed for their study indicated that they value the opportunity to share in the building and shaping of young people’s lives, and that they enjoy their role as community educators.

Service-learning partnerships are also valued because they help affirm the work of the community partners, sometimes giving them and their work more prestige because of the involvement (and implied support and approval) of people from the university. For example, Preece’s (2016, 13) research suggests that service-learning initiatives can help legitimate community-based projects. This came out clearly in a comment from one of the community partners interviewed for Preece’s research:

We were very happy to be with you [students] and the children also saw – and I also saw that I am also important ... the children and parents saw that this is a legitimate thing Your presence helped because some parents thought this was just a game. (Preece 2016. 14)

While the research suggests that community partners involved in service-learning initiatives typically value and appreciate these initiatives, the literature also discusses challenges frequently mentioned. One such a challenge is the importance—and difficulty—of building relationships to sustain the partnership. University partners cannot expect service-learning partnerships to flourish if they themselves are unwilling to dedicate a considerable amount of time and energy to building relationships with community partners. Sandy and Holland’s (2006, 39) research suggests that community partners expect university partners to engage with them in person. They emphasise that it is not enough for community partners to relate only to the students involved in service-learning placements—faculty and other university actors need to also show their commitment and spend time with the community partner. Similarly, Nduna (2007, 74) stresses that the active involvement of academic staff is necessary for service-learning initiatives to succeed.

Another issue, which was raised by community partners is the importance of ongoing communication. Kimme Hea and Wendler Shah (2016, 61) note that problems relating to communication came up very frequently when community partners spoke about failed service-learning placements. It is clear that community partners expect university partners to spend time with them and commit to establishing good channels for ongoing communication during the service-learning project.

Community Partner Experiences at Rhodes University

As discussed in the previous section, existing literature on community partners' experiences of service-learning suggests that community partners value the service provided by students, appreciate the way in which service-learning provides them with opportunities for forming new networks and greater access to resources, enjoy their role as community educators, and benefit from the prestige and status that the involvement of the university can confer on their projects. The research also suggests that while community partners interviewed generally value service-learning initiatives, they emphasise that such initiatives only work if university partners are willing to invest time in building relationships with their community partners; and if there is regular and consistent communication between the university and community partners.

The findings of my research echo the same sentiments, but also differ slightly from these findings. Firstly, as with the research discussed above, community partners interviewed indicated that they valued the service provided by the students. One of the strongest themes that emerged from the interviews was just a straightforward appreciation for the services provided by the students.

Here are some comments illustrating this theme:

[The students'] commitment is a 100%, ja. And it really makes a difference into the children's lives.

It's a win for everybody.

[T]he university is really doing a good job. ... Once the [vice-chancellor] said, the university is for [the whole town]. I am seeing that happening: that the university is for Grahamstown because not only the children are benefiting from the university, not only the teachers, but also the leaders can benefit from the university.

[What I appreciate about having the students coming into the school is] just the breath of fresh air for me, just being exposed to a new ways of doing things. Just every time we get these students, I feel like I am also being developed.

[The] learners really, they enjoy, you know, when they are having these practical activities. And it is a motivation; it motivates learners to pursue science subjects So really I feel that ... our learners they benefit from these practical activities.

Many of the university's community partners are local schools—these partners emphasised that the students were positive role models for their learners:

The students [are] like a bigger sister or brother to these children and it's again just to give that balance, they took a lot of stress from them in a sense that [they] know ... that there is someone that is genuinely interested in them as a person and genuinely wants them to become something in life.

[The students] have this motivating effect, so that learners are motivated to pursue science subjects because if you check, generally [our learners] don't want to do science subjects in high school, so this initiative tries to catch them while they are still young, so that they can follow the science route when they are at high school.

Another partner felt that they benefited from the engagement and stimulation that the students provided to those involved in the programme, which involved institutionalised people:

I mean [the service-learning program] is not essential to our clinical service or anything ... but we don't have a full staff to run a program and keep [the patients] occupied every day, so a lot of those people ... spend a lot of time all alone. ... [So the program] gives them some stimulation.

The above findings are similar to the findings of other research conducted on community engagement in the sense that community partners, for the most part, indicated that they found the service provided by students valuable, at least to some extent. Another similarity between the literature on community partners' experiences and the findings of our research relates to an appreciation for the way in which service-learning programmes can provide opportunities for networking—such that even if the service being provided does not in itself benefit a particular partner, it may bring other beneficial opportunities. For example, one community partner indicated that students assisted learners in her school to fill in application forms for enrolling at a university. This was not part of the service-learning initiative, but the learners used their contact with the students to ask for the assistance that they could not easily get from school or home. Another example given was that after the conclusion of a particular service-learning initiative, some of the students returned to visit the learners they had been working with; and so even in instances where this particular initiative had not in itself brought many tangible benefits, there was a potential for an ongoing relationship.

However, there was one interviewee who was fairly sceptical about the possibility of the programme bringing advantages for the community partner. The concerns raised by this partner were similar to some of the concerns expressed by participants in the literature surveyed above in the sense that they felt that service-learning programmes work best when they involve a long-term commitment to build relationships—something that this interviewee felt was not the case:

So they come here, let's say three or four times a year and, I mean, in terms of the relationship which is being created with the [community members involved in the initiative] it's, one can say, non-existent, because they're not here all the time, you know. This was at the start but now I think there has been a bit of a progress, but I mean the issue at hand still remains that these guys are not here full time, you know I think one of the issues is relationship, one needs to build a relationship in order to it to have an impact, but it's not there yet.

While other partners were generally more positive about the service-learning initiatives that they were a part of, there were quite a few comments, which suggested that community partners would like to see more interest and commitment on the part of the university. The following comments all reflect this desire:

Well, what I'm craving for is that ... because sometimes programs come and go. I wish this could be sustained as long as the university is there and as long as the school is there ... we [should] keep this link because I'm sure this is not a futile exercise. It is something we are benefiting out of.

We are within the vicinity of Rhodes University, so we expect Rhodes to reach out to us, so when we have such engagement, we really feel that we are part and parcel of the Grahamstown community. So we need more because it's not only science, you know, we need mathematics, people who are coming to promote maths clubs, you know, we need students who can come in with drama, we need students who can come in with music, students who can come in with various projects, so that learners are developed holistically.

I mean I understand with the university sometimes it's all about ticking some of the boxes ... But I think then maybe, the only thing I expect from them, let them invest into more resources in ensuring that [the service provided results in success].

Other interviewees made similar comments, especially in response to questions on how the service-learning initiatives could be improved. Rather than suggesting ways to improve the current initiatives, several interviewees simply indicated that they would like more of the same—more projects, more student involvement and so on.

A point of concern, which came up in the interviews relates to how the community partners seemed relatively disempowered in terms of their ability to initiate and drive these partnerships. Only two of the 10 partners I spoke to had initiated the service-learning relationship in which they were involved, while the eight other partners were all involved in programmes that were initiated by the university. When asked about how the partnerships they were involved in had begun, typical responses were along these lines:

I think it was last year when it started. I was visited by ... I can't remember [her name] ... and this was introduced to us and we were also told that it had already started with

[another school], they have been doing it at [this other school] so they would like to extend it to our school.

The impression I got from comments such as this is that community partners are passive players in the partnerships—they eagerly accept what is on offer, but do not play an active role in initiating and driving the programme. This impression was borne out further by the lack of knowledge on the part of some partners about what the service-learning initiatives were all about. For example, at two partnership sites, both schools, the partners seemed to think that students who were coming to the school were education students who were involved in the project in order to gain the teaching experience; whereas the service-learning initiatives concerned did not involve education students at all.

Furthermore, the manner in which some partners talked about their own role in the programme suggested a level of disempowerment. Take for example this exchange between me and a community partner (in this case from a local school):

Me: Did you have input into the goals of this program? Or did the goals come from the university?

Community Partner: The goals are coming from them. All we are happy with is that even if they are doing what [ever] kind of a lesson, we know that the learners are going to gain.

Me: Because it's in English?

Community Partner: Exactly, because it's in English. You know we are struggling with the learners from the township in terms of mastering the language. The education system now is no longer like it was in the past where we would write different exam papers. The paper that is written in Grade 9 at [a privileged fee-paying school] is the same paper that will be written over here so we've got to pull ourselves up and try to meet the standards. And now if there is something additional from what we are doing, that makes us happy.

Me: So your role as the school is that you provide the space and the [learners]?

Community Partner: Provide the space and the learners, you know.

In this respect, the findings of our research are quite different from the findings of the research conducted by Sandy and Holland (2006), who found that community partners strongly valued the opportunity to mentor and help develop university students. Such partners stressed that they welcome the opportunity to guide students and play the role of educator. Only two of the partners interviewed for this research spoke about playing a role in mentoring or educating the students—others seemed to regard the students as quite capable of getting on with the programme and saw their own role as that of

providing the space and opportunity for them to do so. Furthermore, one community partner even declined to be interviewed at all; saying that she did not think she had anything to say, as all her organisation does is provide learners for the students to work with, without the partner actually playing any active role.

These kind of comments and the fact that the community partners did not typically initiate the programmes concerned, suggest a level of disempowerment from the side of at least some community partners, who seemed to value the presence of the university students, but did not imagine that they themselves had something valuable to contribute to the students' education, or shaping the programme concerned. This calls to mind Osman and Atwood's (2007, 20) warning that to really understand how power dynamics operate in such partnerships one needs to look at the "everyday patterns of participation" that form part of the service-learning initiative. It is clear from some partners' description of the partnerships—and how some of them responded to my questions—that their daily engagement in these partnerships entails following the lead of the university actors, rather than asserting their own agency and expertise in relation to the project.

Conclusion

The findings discussed above suggest that community partners find service-learning partnerships valuable. None of the partners interviewed was opposed to the service-learning initiatives in which they took part; although one partner did express scepticism about its likely success. As with other research conducted on the experiences of community partners, interviewees in this study emphasised the importance of building relationships and communication. However, a concern that I had as I went about doing my research was the relative disempowerment that was apparent among community partners with regard to service-learning initiatives. Many partners seemed to value the initiative, but saw their role as little more than providing the opportunity for the university to intervene in some way. Careful consideration is needed in order to find ways in which the power dynamics inherent in a relationship between the university and community partners can be fruitfully navigated to counteract this kind of disempowerment.

It is clear that further research on the experiences of community partners is needed, both in South Africa and elsewhere. In addition, it is important to note that my research, and most studies conducted on community partners' experiences involved soliciting the views of people in positions of authority at community partner sites—for example, NGO workers and teachers. The views of those who are supposedly the beneficiaries of the initiatives concerned—for example, learners or those within the community served by the NGO—have not been included here. There are a few instances where the research explored the experiences of the supposed beneficiaries—see for example, Mitchell and Humphries (2007) and Schmidt and Robby (2002), who both explored how learners at schools experienced a service-learning projects initiated by a local university. However,

most studies conducted on the experiences of community partners (including mine) focused on the experiences of those heading up the community initiatives. This research, therefore, needs to be complemented with research that explores the experiences of the final beneficiaries of the partnerships concerned.

To conclude, the findings of the research discussed above suggest that community partners believe that service-learning was of some benefit to them. Concerns that service-learning amounts to a form of “poverty tourism”, which does nothing more than just make universities look good, while undermining the dignity of the poor, do not seem to be supported by the responses from community partners discussed above, nor by other studies on service-learning. The findings discussed above support the findings of other studies in showing that service-learning partners value the presence of students and want universities to be committed partners with community organisations. The findings point to some concerns around the relative disempowerment of community partners, who rarely initiate service-learning partnerships, and who seem to simply accept whatever is on offer from the university. That said, they value the relationship, as some partners have been able to build on the existing relationships with university partners to initiate new projects. While the study generally concludes that service-learning partnerships are beneficial to communities, further research—particularly research that explores the experiences of the final intended beneficiaries of service-learning partnerships—is needed before we can confidently say that service-learning initiatives are succeeding in addressing the needs of the communities in question.

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