Article

Universities and the Co-construction of Knowledge with Communities

Enver Motala
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7999-9720
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa
emotala1@gmail.com

Salim Vally
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9156-1775
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa
salimvally1@gmail.com

Abstract

The article discusses the question of the co-construction of knowledge between the university and its communities in the pursuance of community engagement, which is one of the key mandates of universities in South Africa. It reflects on the limitations of most academic approaches to the concept and practices associated with the scholarship of engagement and problematises the complex notion of knowledge co-construction and what is implied in this notion, dealing with the relationship between community engagement and sociocultural power and its associated issues.

Keywords: universities; community engagement; scholarship of engagement; knowledge co-construction; sociocultural power

UNISA

Education as Change
https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC
Volume 26 | 2022 | #11352 | 18 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/11352
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
© The Author(s) 2022

Published by the University of Johannesburg and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Introduction and Background

Community engagement, together with research, teaching and learning, is one of the triad of mandates adopted by most (if not all) universities in South Africa. Yet, community engagement is at best a "poor cousin" in this triad because it is largely under- or unfunded and generally has a limited budget. Moreover, it does not count much for upward mobility and academic promotion, and it is generally done by a small cohort of academic staff who are regarded as its "practitioners" (Fear et al. 2001; Van Schalkwyk and De Lange 2018). There is a welter of writings on the typologies of engagement (Barker 2004; Bhagwan 2017; Cherrington et al. 2019; Sandmann 2008) following Boyer's seminal pieces on the scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1996, 1997). And there are discussions about the "barriers and drivers" associated with achieving the mandate of engagement (Johnson 2020). Recently there has been a spurt of interest in this field of study, including the formation of academic associations such as symposia (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2009), conferences,[1] and even an inaugural address (Muthwa 2018).

The focus here is, however, on the question of how universities and the communities they engage with might co-construct knowledge based on a set of mutually agreed objectives. This is done to better understand the methods, principles, validation and usefulness of co-constructed knowledge. The examination here raises issues about the complexities of the relationship between universities and communities. It assumes that academics working in university settings could have an important role as intellectual activists in the development of social and political consciousness to support the process of social mobilisation, especially in working-class communities, social movements and organisations (Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Hall 2009). The article is not about intellectuals *per se* and their role in society, as argued in some seminal writings (Alexander 2012; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Eyerman, Svensson, and Soderqvist 1987; Ranciere 1987; Said 1996; West 1991). Nor is it about the process of knowledge production generally. It focuses on their role as academics seeking to develop scholarship in the area of community engagement. Yet, how this role is discharged requires careful consideration and builds on experience of the need for a more consistent, coherent and principled relationship between universities and their communities—a concept we will examine presently. Contemporary practice is, in our view, limited in its understanding of the complex nature of community engagement.

Although the issue we canvass here is implicated in the more general discussion about the role of radical educationists in universities, the focus here is on a particular aspect of that question, that is, their role in building a coherent and mutually respectful relationship between the university and its communities whatever the predisposition regarding these by universities. This is a subset of the wider question of knowledge

[1] For example, the Council on Higher Education's conference on "The Engaged University", held on 6–8 October 2021. A conference on a similar theme was convened by Rhodes University and Nelson Mandela University.

production (and its validation), language, pedagogy and other related issues, and it is inseparable from the proclivities of academics regarding the epistemologies that are privileged to the exclusion of others. This exclusion applies especially to radical feminist thought, indigenous knowledge systems, and the knowledge subjugation enforced on colonised and enslaved societies.[2] We examine the possibilities (and requirements) for obviating the privileging of academic knowledge relative to the knowledge of communities in the pursuance of the third mandate of the university—that of community engagement (CE). This has not been properly conceptualised in conventional academic practice because few academics are aware of some of the key principles of engaged scholarship and the co-construction of knowledge between the university's academics and such communities. Past emphases on class or anti-racist struggles have been tempered by a recognition of the entitlements emanating from the claims for individualism and freedom[3] and a recognition of the multiplicity of "intersectional" social identities—including gender, class, "race", and sexuality.[4]

We believe that definitions are best constructed in the relationship between concepts ("engagement" in this case) and practice, and not as generalisations having predetermined or definitive characteristics. So, for instance, referring to the concept of community, we argue that although universities engage with a wide variety of communities, which could be differentiated with reference to geographic, social, economic, gendered, social class, educational, occupational and other distinguishing criteria, the concept of community we use is framed with reference to the actual practices of universities in working-class communities. We do not enter into the discussions about "imagined" or real communities (Anderson 1991), but refer quite simply to those communities that historically have been and continue to be marginalised through the multiplicity of deliberate, oppressive, and exploitative gendered, racist, sexist, class-based and other discriminatory policies and practices impacting such communities. Despite the many differences (including regarding power), such communities are characterised by their socio-economic status, which is a consequence of the effects of the structural entrenchment of social and political marginalisation. From

---

2 There is now a very substantial body of writing on gender, patriarchy, sexuality, decolonisation and on indigenous knowledge, which we do not traverse here because although matters concerning the development of knowledge are related, the focus here is on the question of the processes and forms of knowledge that are developed between the university and its communities, the principles and criteria of such knowledge, the relationships of power and authority implied in its development and the role of academics in this area of scholarship.

3 See Mishra (2017), who discusses the genesis of the strong modern reassertion of the ideas of individualism in enlightenment thought.

4 Holvino (2010, 248) emphasises the synchronous processes of identity, institutional and social practice involved in intersectionality and specifically proposes "theoretical and methodological interventions for researching and practicing more forcefully and intentionally the simultaneity of race, gender and class in organizations, including researching and publicizing the hidden stories at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, nation and sexuality; identifying, untangling and changing the differential impact of everyday practices in organizations and identifying and linking internal organizational processes with external societal processes".

an epistemological point of view, such communities are often regarded as having little useful or insightful knowledge and they are further discriminated against in the knowledge regimes that are sociolinguistically and in other ways dominant (Alexander 1989).

Regarding the concept of "engagement", we argue that the practice of community engagement in the pursuit of the mandate of universities about CE needs to be placed on a firmer foundation, as we will argue in this article. Doing this requires an explication of the principled approaches necessary for a proper conceptualisation of engagement and its practices. The concept of engaged scholarship relative to communities and how knowledge is co-constructed is dealt with below. The concept is very much the subject of this article and is not easily reducible to standard definitions.[5] As we show below in the sections that problematise these concepts, they are best understood through an explanation that sets out the diverse interpretations, applications and practical implications.

Pursuant to this introduction we discuss:

- The limitations of most academic conceptions of "engaged scholarship"
- Problematising the complexities of knowledge co-construction
- Sociocultural power and the co-construction of knowledge
- Rethinking the role of academics in community engagement and scholarly enquiry.

Conventional academic approaches to "community engagement" and its various expressions as service learning, consultancy, the development of multipronged relationships as in the "triple helix" (Cooper 2011) or Mode 2 (Gibbons 2007) and other such forms are simply inadequate for understanding the complex challenges faced by activists in academic institutions intent on extending the ideas and practices of engaged scholarship through the co-construction of knowledge. Many of the discussions about the nature of engaged research and scholarship do not deal with some of the fundamental issues concerning the co-construction of knowledge with working-class and marginalised communities because their focus is largely on questions about the nature of scholarship, its typologies, academic validation through accredited publications and their "impact", and other such criteria derived from conventional conceptions of scholarship (Bhagwan 2017; Cherrington et al. 2019; Sandmann 2008).

---

[5] A formal definition could be the following: "While there are almost as many definitions out there as there are people trying to define it, in its simplest terms community engagement seeks to better engage the community to achieve long-term and sustainable outcomes, processes, relationships, discourse, decision-making, or implementation. 'Community engagement' is therefore a strategic process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation to identify and address issues affecting their well-being" (PennState College of Agricultural Sciences 2022).

Following Boyer's (1996, 1997) seminal contributions to this issue, there is a burgeoning literature on the idea of engaged scholarship and research supporting the broadening of the intellectual activities of academics through it (Cooper 2012; Escrigas et al. 2014; Favish and Simpson 2016; Feldman and Rowell 2019). However, this literature has little orientation to the important question of how such engagement can advance the co-construction of knowledge between the university and its communities. Its focus is on arguing the necessity of extending the warrant of universities to include a wider range of intellectual activities regarded as scholarship beyond the limits of research and its publication. It argues that the scholarship of discovery (research) should not be privileged to the exclusion of other attributes of scholarship, such as the scholarship of teaching, integration of knowledge and "engagement". We take the function of critical and engaged social scholarship as axiomatic since we regard these as fundamentally inseparable from any idea of a public system of education and its institutions.

Yet, even the ideas about the "scholarship of engagement" as expressed in the debates engendered by Boyer's (1997) ideas do not examine how such engaged scholarship is constructed in and together with communities. Communities have a rich store of educational conceptions, experiences and practices that lie outside the framework of formal educational programmes as envisaged in the activities of "engaged scholarship". Such community knowledges can be contested (as is true of all knowledge claims), but they have to be taken into consideration in constructing knowledge through scholarly engagement. Academic approaches to "engaged scholarship" are quite inadequate for more fundamental approaches to social transformation because they largely misinterpret or ignore the role of communities in shaping the agenda for education and its dissemination.

The imperatives of academic validation militate against the objectives and practices of knowledge co-construction because of the financial and reputational imperatives associated with accredited publication useful for ranking, career advancement, ratings, academic prestige and other purposes. These imperatives have a limiting influence on the intellectual work of universities and the possibilities for knowledge co-construction and engagement more generally. The pressure of accredited publication and its constraining approaches to the development of co-constructed knowledge reflect, moreover, the contradictions faced by higher education institutions espousing a commitment to community engagement despite the increasing difficulty of achieving this in practice. This is in part attributable to the choices made by universities whose engagement activities are directed predominantly at supporting the knowledge and skills requirements of corporate business and, to a lesser degree, the government.

Most academics are unaware, and even dismissive of, the considerable amount of "non-formal" and unaccredited educational research and practice taking place in such communities. A clearer understanding of the relationship between the knowledges, social life, livelihoods and educational activities of especially socio-economically

marginalised communities in conjunction with research and education activities based in academic and other institutions is called for.

Problematising the Complexities of Knowledge Co-construction

There are complex issues that continuously present problems for radical educationalists who work out of academic institutions. For critical scholarly activists, attempts at the co-construction of knowledge and education with communities must wrestle with the contradictions between the limits imposed by academic and formal institutional demands. Alternative methodological approaches, necessarily long term in order to respect democratic community processes, receive paltry support. Unlike conventional academic knowledge, the idea, and practices, of co-constructing knowledge implies a broader view of knowledge not limited to academic scholarship and its publication alone. It implies wider interpretations that include knowledge for the development of critical consciousness among participants, a greater awareness of important social issues and their effects on communities, dialogic exchanges among the participants engaged in collaborations, and the publication and dissemination of such knowledge in academic and non-academic forms. The idea of co-construction also implies the need to draw on the epistemological and intellectual agency of the participants in the process of engagement with the purpose of producing useful knowledge. It is intended to draw on the diversity of knowledges that are brought together to advance the shared objectives of those who are engaged.

Although it is not the focus here, this criticism applies to academic knowledge more generally because of the gendered, patriarchal, colonial and historical prejudices deeply inured in such knowledge.[6] These preconceptions are exacerbated by the violence against indigenous knowledge systems, which academic knowledge often ignores or is unaware of (Hoppers 2001, 2005; Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2019; Visvanathan 2009).

We regard it as imperative to problematise some of the complexities that arise in the co-construction of knowledge for critical scholarly activists concerned with the paternalism that sometimes passes for co-construction. We concede that even the most credible forms of co-construction are never free of the contradictions that any serious undertaking in community engagement must confront. These exist in the context of the contested social relations that abide in the very nature of the resistance to capitalist societies through community engagement. For this reason, we deal mainly with questions of the inherent sociocultural power that privileges academics and intellectuals.

The case for the co-construction of knowledge is simultaneously about the attributes of participatory action research (PAR), its relationship to and difference from other methods of enquiry, and its social and political orientation as a tool for progressive research, relying on the theoretical and practical traditions on which it is built. Here too,

[6] A list of the writing on these various issues will require a complete bibliographic index in its own right and is thus not included here.

like many other systemic ideas, PAR can be interpreted in a variety of ways, which do not always lend themselves to its important foundational principles. So, for instance, even the World Bank agrees with the idea of "subject participation" (Mohan 2001), but its purposes are entirely different from those of radical approaches to PAR as supporting the autonomous agency and mobilisation of marginalised communities. The underpinning interests of PAR must always relate to a radical agenda for social justice and freedom. Outside the framework of a socially transformative agenda, the activities of academics or intellectuals cannot but be opportunistic or misguided. The agenda of engaged scholarship based on co-constructed knowledge should support social power for counter-hegemonic purposes and bring possibilities and new approaches to intractable social issues, which conventional approaches cannot do.

Although research deals with complex issues and has been elevated to a "scientific" endeavour, it is nonetheless an activity of human beings engaged in observing and analysing, learning, discovering and finding ways to solve and answer intriguing questions about natural, physical, social and existential phenomena. Indigenous ways of knowing (in conventional circles it might be heretical to suggest this) are also given to enquiry, but their methods are sometimes and understandably different, having been developed over millennia through practice and convention by human societies not using the methods of university-based science—a term whose provenance is relatively recent.[7] Yet they too are about understanding, discovering, knowing, verifying and applying knowledge.

Particular tools of enquiry are obviously more amenable to some enquiries than others, especially when thinking about the disciplinary boundaries established in academia. And this applies even more so for knowledge co-construction. For example, the force of gravity of celestial bodies on one another would require techniques of measurement quite different from measuring the levels of poverty in a population or the influence of political parties on the population of a country—even though these might usefully employ some or other mathematical symbols as part of their technique. The same could be said about the approaches to enquiry that might be employed in understanding the spread of a virus compared to measuring the extent of inequality in any society. The largely mathematical models employed by physicists will have little relevance to understanding the personal identities and specific social histories of local communities in a study about employment levels in them, since the latter refers to human behaviour, its context, histories, structures, relations, cultures and traditions—attributes that have little meaning in understanding cosmological phenomena. Importantly, the very nature of the questions asked suggest that some techniques of enquiry could be more useful than others for purposes natural, social or physical. Reducing all things to their "essence" without reference to their connectedness is the habit of insisting on the development of theory—on theorisation as the high point of all knowledge formation.

---

[7] English philosopher and historian of science William Whewell coined the term scientist in 1833, and it first appeared in print in Whewell's anonymous 1834 review of Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* published in *The Quarterly Review* (Danielson 2001).

Here, too, the obvious is not in dispute—that is, the need to find some organising and analytical principle in the mass of data that we encounter in daily life and in our enquiries. Without it we would not be able to cross a busy street, nor would we know about the seasons and how they can affect human life. Theories are indeed a powerful body of knowledge, which enables us to understand countless phenomena in nature and society. Theory also enables a much deeper understanding of some phenomena than we might otherwise have.

There are, nevertheless, limits to theorisation seeking nomothetic generalisation, especially about social phenomena, since these are not given to the universalisms that characterise many physical or natural phenomena.[8] Most frequently these limitations evince a failure to respect the accumulated knowledge and reasoning found in working-class and other marginalised communities since such communities are alleged not to have anything to contribute in the way of "real knowledge" because of the absence of a scientific or reliable method (Conner 2005). Yet these strictures against such knowledge are no less about the assertion of social power and privilege, and are intended to inflict other knowledges uncritically on such communities. Their effect is to obscure the valuable perspectives, life experiences, and ideas of communities of the excluded and to harness their lives to the "development" agendas of powerful social, economic and political interests.

In academia, for instance, there is a staid and critical view of the concept of "voice" (Stock et al. 2016). Its critique relates to epistemological questions—that is, questions about whether the knowledge obtained through the process of engagement is "authentic" or "profane" (Muller 2000, 2006). And these criticisms have been met with vigorous counter arguments asserting the value of "popular" and unaccredited knowledges (Michelson 1996, 2015; Peters 2006).

In fact, the accusation levelled at academics who are socially engaged intellectuals is that they are driven much more by "romantic" ideas and ideology than by "rational" or intellectually defensible modes of "knowledge production". In this way (and whatever the limitations of community-based enquiry that exist, as in any other form of enquiry), the role of academics or intellectuals is reduced to a banal pragmatism and a discussion about research methods without reference, critically, to the power relations inherent in social enquiry. There can be no gainsaying some of the criticisms about the limits of "voice" and its representation. Yet, how "voice" is constructed, the problems of who it represents and how, the integrity of its sources and the accuracy of interpretations—and especially about the role of intellectuals in this—must not be avoided (Matsuda and Tardy 2008; Prior 2001; Stapleton 2002). These questions are fundamental not only to enquiry but also to the obligations of intellectuals as engaged citizens in the difficult and sometimes "messy" realm of public reasoning, activism and being.

---

8 However, even this is now a matter of rethinking given especially the development in quantum theory and the re-emergence of aspects of Lamarckian and other ideas (Liu 2008; Raup 1992).

Sociocultural Power and the Co-construction of Knowledge

The important question of the relationship between those who are engaged in research and educational activities, and those who are constituted as its "subjects" (or objects) is often dealt with in academia from the perspective of its "ethical" requirements. These refer to a set of guidelines, which are generally silent about the nature of the social and power relationship between researchers (university academics) and the researched (various "communities"). Rather, they focus on issues such as how "respondents" are apprised of the research, the disclosure of confidential information, the uses of the research, the identity of those who are its subjects and other issues. These criteria for the ethical behaviour required of researchers are relevant for the formal approval of research projects that are deemed to be ethical. These questions, which are important in themselves, are however inadequate for the purposes of the discussions about which we are concerned.

In the case of knowledge co-construction, we are concerned with questions about the inter-relationship of social class, gender, "race", geographic location and other attributes of power between researchers and communities—attributes that are structurally inherent in all research contexts.[9] These questions are important, especially for researchers who come from a wide variety of social locations—class, geographic, gendered, apartheid's racist classifications, histories and "cultures", religious and other orientations. Perhaps most importantly, the differing social status associated with educational qualifications is a key attribute that affects the relations of power between researchers, since research itself is viewed as an academic activity based on educational privilege. It seems trite to say that if a researched community is less educationally advantaged than the researcher, unequal relations of power will persist.

The question that arises is about the impact of these unequal relations and whether they negate the possibilities for engaging in the co-construction of knowledge. Is it a reason for "outsider" activists not engaging in critical social research in working-class and other marginalised communities? Is such enquiry, because it is inherently unequal and privileges academics and activists from "outside", fatally flawed? Is it suggested that people with different social locations are inherently incapable of doing research outside their social location—that therefore all the ideas about "organic intellectuals" are simply unrealistically romantic? Or is there a way of thinking of this conundrum that could credibly negotiate the contradictions based on social power and location?

---

9 We do not regard all of these as equivalent in their social force and application, as liberal feminist theorists (for instance) seem to argue. We have no doubt that social class location affects these identities in profoundly different ways, even though they intersect. See in particular Mojab and Carpenter (2019, 1), who explain how "'intersectionality' has become a hegemonic analytical and methodological tool among students and scholars with the conviction that it is a radical rupture with white/liberal feminism and denotes a political commitment to the most oppressed members of society".

For academics or intellectuals who are committed to advancing social justice through research and activists who are engaged in research in academia, the most troublesome question arises from their social location (class, gender, “race”, geographic, locality, history and identity) and the integrity of their activities in researching communities. Given their structural location in a position of relative privilege, the question that faces them is whether they can reasonably be expected to enquire into and analyse the reality that affects the lives of communities from whom they are separated by such structural locations of advantage. Can they really represent the perspectives of such socially “distant” communities with any integrity and honesty? Are there in reality not fundamental impediments to the way in which “structurally distanced” researchers and educationists can hope to speak honestly about the lives and aspirations of socially marginalised communities? These are some of the vexed questions that progressive academics and intellectuals located in universities need to deal with.

We begin by reflecting on certain general issues about research and then, much more importantly for this discussion, about how *social relations in enquiry* can be understood without potentially debilitating effects for meaningful research. There can be no doubt that the structural location of academics or intellectuals is important, but how this is understood could have the effect of paralysing serious enquiry. We need to examine this issue carefully for several reasons. Firstly, all societies hitherto have been characterised by forms of social difference (class, gender, religion, colour, educational qualification, social status, etc.), and these express themselves moreover through the structures of social differentiation and privilege that provide access to socio-economic and political power. Nearly all societies have evinced significant levels of social inequality—the record of the Soviet state and its satellites and of progressive social democracies included.

Secondly, even among oppressed social classes there are many important—if not fundamental—sociopolitical differences. These differences, though not “structural” in their economic attributes, are nevertheless based on different levels of access to power and social capability and are often based on a wide range of causes, including gendered, “racial”, religious, “ethnic”, “tribal”, geopolitical and other social markers—real or perceived. Monarchies, Nazism, colonial powers, the apartheid state and meritocratic societies in general have consistently exploited these differences among the oppressed. In capitalist societies, such social differentiation is inevitable because of their structural attributes representing different social and economic interests and their contradictions impeding the possibilities for social cohesion. The social relations of power make for contradictory claims on planning and resource allocation between competing social classes and groups because of the structural dissonance in the material reality affecting all these groups.

Thirdly, there is no necessary correspondence of ideas, practices and struggles between people who occupy the same social and structural location. As we know, xenophobia, racism, sexist ideas and practices, religious bigotry and “ethnic” conflict are egregious

characteristics of human history leading to the forms of violence now so prevalent globally. We have seen how ignoring their ostensibly convergent material interests (as a class or otherwise), human beings have often acted on the ostensible basis of the “race” and “ethnic”, gendered, religious or other difference invariably exploited to advance particular forms of power.[10]

The questions we must ask are whether academics or intellectuals are necessarily paralysed by the differences between their social location relative to others and whether it is simply capricious to suppose that they could co-construct meaningful educational and cultural programmes with others of different social locations and status. In our view, there most definitely is no reason for paralysis. This is so because, while structural location is a very important attribute of difference, it is possible for conscious interventions to deal with and mitigate the impact of its contradictory implications. If such approaches were not possible, we would have no hope of social change at all. However, such necessarily *progressive* interventions imply an intellectual and practical commitment to a set of values about research and its methods that are consistent with the intended outcomes of the research, namely, to enhance through research the possibilities for the co-construction of knowledge and by doing so to support the achievement of particular social values. In other words, how the research is conceptualised and conducted is not separable from its underlying purposes and the goals of socially radical outcomes. The approach to knowledge co-construction must demonstrate possibilities that most conventional research is unable to do because of its methodological and conceptual limitations.

Consequently, unless it is argued that only members of working-class and marginalised communities can do useful research about issues affecting “their” communities—and conversely that middle-class intellectuals have no right to enter that domain—we must concede that research and enquiry is an inalienable human endeavour—a human activity that is often imprecise and “messy”—but necessary nonetheless. Social issues are not only about the lives of poor people but are about all of society and all of society is compromised (for instance) by social inequality and rampant poverty. Hence, we are all equally obliged to think about social issues, to act in ways to understand and enquire about it and to collectively find approaches to deal with these issues. Intellectuals have a moral obligation because their intellectual attributes are based on the historic and “congealed” social savings—the “socially necessary labour time”—of working classes over time. The implication of this approach is that academics or intellectuals from middle classes have a historical, moral, political and social role in the co-construction of knowledge for social justice. Social injustice is antithetical to the long-term stability and interests of all society—not only to the interests of marginalised communities.

---

[10] We know, for example, of the Marxist idea about the differences between a “class in itself” and a “class for itself” and that the process of social consciousness and collective organisation is critical to classes being able to defend their interests.

Rethinking the Role of Academics in Community Engagement and Scholarly Enquiry

There are nevertheless some caveats affecting the role of middle-class academics or activists in undertaking community engagement and research about social issues. These caveats include the attributes that are referred to in writings about the principles informing participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; O'Brien 2001). Suffice to say that the contradictory social locations and interests of some researchers and the communities in which they are engaged can be dealt with through a process of openness and comradely disclosure about their differing and common interests and objectives and careful planning and agreement about the objectives of research and education. Organisations, for instance, would need to use data produced through the process of enquiry for specific campaign purposes directly affecting some or other material gain unrelated to its academic purposes. For if these differing outcomes are not contradictory relative to the common objectives of the research, the common purposes remain achievable, and the contradictions thrown up by differing social locations can be overcome by the shared social outcomes envisaged. It implies the sublimation of subjective individual (generally academic) interests to larger social goals—or, to put it in another way, to let social ends define the commonality of the objectives.

Essential to this is that these "common objectives" are properly canvassed, explored, debated and agreed upon. It means that there should be no doubt that the process of research is driven by a set of agreed, co-constructed objectives, which can have differing outcomes that are mutually acceptable within the framework of the joint agreed objectives. It implies open disclosure, *a priori*, of the objectives sought on all sides within the framework of the broader collectively agreed aims of the research.

In our direct experience over many years, communities have had absolutely no problem with the idea of co-constructed knowledge production and have supported it because it represents for them an opportunity to gain access to the university, its physical and intellectual resources, and to learn and share their knowledge. Based on proper understanding, the need for collective work between academics and communities is both urgent and appropriate.

In some of the debates about academic work (in communities of the working class and marginalised) the issue of "benefits" to the community is raised. This concerns the ostensibly direct benefits that communities might derive from research and educational engagements. This issue is deeply implicated in the practices in which academics or intellectuals are engaged. The principal problem that arises from the idea of what "benefits" it will bring to communities is that the very question sets up a relationship between "us" and "them", positing non-mutual relationships and objectives between communities and academics and accepting that such relationships could be based on differing emphases. For instance, while academics may be interested in the processes of knowledge development and its publication and communities may be interested in

knowledge for more direct and concrete outcomes, the framework of their interactions must be based on several shared social objectives around collective knowledge production, socially useful learning, social justice, democratising society and planetary sustainability. If these general objectives are not shared, then the process of co-constructing knowledge is hardly possible. Furthermore, such an approach ("us and them") sharpens the unequal relations and dependency between the partners in the process of research. The approach that co-constructed knowledge adopts should therefore be an open and professed approach. It should be based on mutual considerations, which include:

- that the co-constructed knowledge might have *no direct or immediate benefits* for the communities in which it is done;
- that the academic and community-based researchers have important educational, experiential and knowledge competencies, which are useful for the purpose;
- that the process of collaboration has some important limits, which must be spelt out, and that the best possible mutual outcome of the process of research is the potential for social change that it could engender over time;
- that the co-constructed knowledge has uses for identifying, understanding and analysing critical issues, for joint learning about possible alternatives and demonstrable changes, and discussions about education programmes that are mutually beneficial;
- that the co-constructed knowledge could foster greater awareness of the impact of policy in communities;
- that the co-constructed knowledge could be helpful in rethinking the role of institutions socially, for thinking about work in ways that have social value beyond capitalist labour markets, and most critically, jointly thinking about and acting to support social organisations for humanising and social justice outcomes;
- ultimately, that the conjoint and collective process of knowledge production is a critical spur in support of the reorganisation of social relations towards social transformation.

This approach to research encourages the self-initiated (and sometimes externally stimulated) work of communities. It is both an end in itself and a catalyst for social change through the development of the consciousness of all its participants (including academics in particular) and opens critical questions about the nature of society. It raises questions about the role of educational processes and programmes as an instrument of social change. Perhaps the maxim that should guide the work of academics should always be: Make no false promises and bring no gifts to "them" from "us".

In effect, this approach is not about "us" bringing benefits to "them", but about constructive, open, frank and socially conscious engagements. It is ultimately about mutually important responsibilities shared as human beings collectively engaged in the possibilities for a humanising society through knowledge production. It is more fundamentally about developing mutual roles consciously in the search for an

alternative and just society. Educated "elites" can initiate, facilitate and foster the process of wider understanding and consciousness together with communities—not as outsiders—but as engaged intellectuals and socially responsible citizens who have the advantage of years of usefully reconstructed training. The implication of this is that the co-construction of knowledge does not take for granted the role of academics without recognising the need to clarify relations of power arising from gender, social class, educational, "race" and other historical and structural conditions that are impediments to the development of mutuality in educational praxis.

Conclusion

The possibilities for knowledge co-construction are hugely dependent on the existence and sustainability of locally based organisations, even if these have wider networks with national or international links. They represent a counter-current to the concepts of knowledge and pedagogy driven largely by the conditions of knowledge production in academia having little understanding or empathy for the idea of an "autonomous" knowledge outside the conventions of academia. The weakness of community-based organisations is simultaneously a failure of elites, indifferent to their democratic responsibilities, and a result of the inability to understand the critical value of local and autonomous democratic development, privileging instead self-interest and the lure of the market. The response to this reality calls for a counter-hegemonic praxis that is critical of the dominant conventions of academia, which largely preclude the idea of "autonomous" knowledge production outside the academy. For this reason, the process of co-constructing knowledge is ultimately about the co-construction of individual and socially organised relationships in the production of knowledge between academics or intellectuals, activists and communities. This possibility is not taken for granted since it is predicated on an acceptance of the importance of the wide range of experience and knowledge brought together in the process of collaboration. This in turn is dependent on a commitment to reflect continuously on collective practices, their complexities and contradictions. Such a commitment calls on academics and intellectuals to rethink their role in the production of knowledge and provides a real challenge in terms of how such knowledge is conceptualised in socially meaningful ways.

References

Alexander, N. 2012. "South Africa Today: The Moral Responsibility of Intellectuals". In *Enough Is as Good as a Feast: A Tribute to Neville Alexander, 22 October 1936–27 August 2012*, edited by H. Vally and M. Isaacson, 31–37. Johannesburg: Foundation for Human Rights.

Alexander, N. 1989. *Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania*. Cape Town: Buchu Books.

Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. London: Verso.

Barker, D. 2004. “The Scholarship of Engagement: A Taxonomy of Five Emerging Practices”. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 9 (2): 123–36. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1096763.pdf.

Bhagwan, R. 2017. “Towards a Conceptual Understanding of Community Engagement in Higher Education in South Africa”. *Perspectives in Education* 35 (1): 171–85. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v35i1.13.

Boyer, E. L. 1996. “The Scholarship of Engagement”. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49 (7): 18–33. https://doi.org/10.2307/3824459.

Boyer, E. L. 1997. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bourdieu, P., and J.-C. Passeron. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications.

CHE (Council on Higher Education). 2009. *Proceedings of the CHE Symposium on Community Engagement, 19 March 2009, Pretoria*. CHE: Pretoria.

Cherrington, A. M., E. Scheckle, M. Khau, N. De Lange, and A. Du Plessis. 2019. “What Does It Mean to be an ‘Engaged University’? Reflections from a University and School Community Engagement Project”. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 14 (2): 165–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197918779945.

Choudry, A., and D. Kapoor. 2010. *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production*. London: Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230112650.

Conner, C. D. 2005. *A People’s History of Science: Miners, Midwives and “Low Mechanicks”*. New York, NY: Nation Books.

Cooper, D. 2011. *The University in National Development: Case Studies of Use-Oriented Research*. HSRC Press: Cape Town.

Cooper, D. 2012. “The UCT Idea of ‘Social Responsiveness’: ‘Engaged Scholarship’ Must be at Its Conceptual Core for Academic Staff”. In *Social Responsiveness Report 2010*, edited by B. Schmid, 26–37. Cape Town: University of Cape Town. Accessed May 2013. http://www.socialresponsiveness.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/356/SR_reports/SR_report_2010.pdf.

Danielson, D. 2011. “Scientist’s Birthright”. *Nature* 410: 1031. https://doi.org/10.1038/35074216.

Escrigas, C., J. Granados Sánchez, B. Hall, R. Tandon, G. Puig, and M. Forns. 2014. *Higher Education in the World 5: Knowledge Engagement and Higher Education; Contributing to Social Change*. GUNi Series on the Social Commitment of Universities. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Eyerman, R., and A. Jamison. 1991. *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*. London: Polity.

Gramsci, A. 1999. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated and edited by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. Essential Classics in Politics: Antonio Gramsci. London: Elecbook. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520330740.

Eyerman, R., L. G. Svensson, and T. Soderqvist, eds. 1987. Introduction to *Intellectuals, Universities, and the State in Western Modern Societies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Favish, J., and G. Simpson. 2016. "Community Engagement". In *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy*, 241–78. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Fear, F. A., C. L. Rosaen, P. Foster-Fishman, and R. J. Bawden. 2001. "Outreach as Scholarly Expression: A Faculty Perspective". *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 6 (2): 21–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2019.1618624.

Feldman, A., and L. Rowell. 2019. "Knowledge Democracy and Action Research: An Exchange". In "Connecting Research and Practice for Professionals and Communities", edited by A. Feldman and L. Rowell, special issue, *Educational Action Research* 27 (3): 335–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2019.1618624.

Gibbons, M. 2007. "Engagement as a Core Value in a Mode 2 Society". In *Community Engagement in Higher Education: Proceedings of the Conference*, 19–29. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education. Accessed November 29, 2022. https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/HEQC_Conference_Community_Engagement_HE_2007.pdf.

Hoppers, C. A. O. 2001. "Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Academic Institutions in South Africa". *Perspectives in Education* 19 (1): 73–86. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC87061.

Hoppers, C. A. O. 2005. *Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development: The Role of the University*. Johannesburg: Centre for Education Policy Development.

Hall, M. 2009. "Community Engagement in South African Higher Education". Paper presented at the CHE Symposium on Community Engagement, March 19, 2009, Pretoria.

Holvino, E. 2010. "Intersections: The Simultaneity of Race, Gender and Class in Organization Studies". In "Gender and Ethnicity", edited by M. B. Calás, L. Smircich, J. Tienari, and C. Funck Ellehave, special issue, *Gender, Work and Organization* 17 (3): 248–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00400.x.

Johnson, B. J. 2020. "Community Engagement: Barriers and Drivers in South African Higher Education". *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34 (6): 87–105. https://doi.org/10.20853/34-6-4116.

Kemmis, S., and R. McTaggart. 2000. "Participatory Action Research". In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 567–605. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Matsuda, P. K., and C. M. Tardy. 2008. "Continuing the Conversation on Voice in Academic Writing". *English for Specific Purposes* 27 (1): 100–5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2007.04.002.

Michelson, E. 1996. "'Auctoritee' and 'Experience': Feminist Epistemology and the Assessment of Experiential Learning". *Feminist Studies* 22 (3): 627–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178133.

Michelson, E. 2015. *Gender, Experience, and Knowledge in Adult Learning: Alisoun's Daughters*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315709291.

Mishra, P. 2017. *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. London: Penguin Random House.

Mohan, G. 2001. "Beyond Participation: Strategies for Deeper Empowerment". In *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, edited by B. Cooke and U. Kothari, 153–67. London: Zed Books.

Mojab, S, and S. Carpenter. 2019. "Marxism, Feminism, and 'Intersectionality'". *Labor and Society* 22 (2): 275–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12409.

Muller, J. 2000. *Rethinking the Role of Academics in Community Engagement and Scholarly Enquiry*. London: Routledge.

Muller, J. 2006. "Autonomy and the Republic of Science". *South African Journal of Higher Education* 20 (6): 807–13. https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v20i6.25615.

Muthwa, S. 2018. "Taking Nelson Mandela University Boldly into the Future in Service of Society". Inaugural Speech, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa. Accessed November 29, 2022. https://www.mandela.ac.za/getmedia/233de940-990b-4091-94d8-f9bcf53de6b3/10Inaugural-Address-Sibongile-Muthwa?disposition=attachment.

National Academy of Sciences. 1999. *Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/6024.

O'Brien, R. 2001. "Um exame da abordagem metodológica da pesquisa ação" [An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action Research]. In *Teoria e Prática da Pesquisa Ação [Theory and Practice of Action Research]*, edited by R. Richardson. João Pessoa: Universidade Federal da Paraíba. (English version). Accessed January 1, 2002. http://www.web.ca/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html.

PennState College of Agricultural Sciences. 2022. "What Is Community Engagement?" Accessed November 28, 2022. https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/what-is-community-engagement.

Peters, M. A. 2006. "Research Quality, Bibliometrics and the Republic of Science". *South African Journal of Higher Education* 20 (6): 773–91. https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v20i6.25613.

Prior, P. 2001. "Voices in Text, Mind, and Society: Sociohistoric Accounts of Discourse Acquisition and Use". *Journal of Second Language Writing* 10 (1–2): 55–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1060-3743(00)00037-0.

Said, E. 1996. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Ranciere, J. 1987. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated by K. Ross. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Raup, D. M. 1992. *Extinction: Bad Genes or Bad Luck?* New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

Sandmann, L. R. 2008. "Conceptualization of the Scholarship of Engagement in Higher Education: A Strategic Review, 1996–2006". *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 12 (1): 91–102.

Smith, L. T., E. Tuck, K. W. Yang, eds. 2019. *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View*. New York, NY: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429505010.

Stapleton, P. 2002. "Critiquing Voice as a Viable Pedagogical Tool in L2 Writing: Returning the Spotlight to Ideas". *Journal of Second Language Writing* 11 (3): 177–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1060-3743(02)00070-X.

Stock, I., and N. L. Eik-Nes. 2016. "Voice Features in Academic Texts: A Review of Empirical Studies". *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 24: 89–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2015.12.006.

Van Schalkwyk, F., and G. De Lange. 2018. "The Engaged University and the Specificity of Place: The Case of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University". *Development Southern Africa* 35 (5): 641–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2017.1419858.

Visvanathan, S. 2009. "Knowledge, Justice and Democracy". In *The Environmental Responsibility Reader*, edited by M. Reynolds, C. Blackmore and M. J. Smith 150–58. London: Zed Books.

West, C. 1991. "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual". In *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, edited by b. hooks and C. West, 131–46. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Liu, Y. 2008. "A New Perspective on Darwin's Pangenesis". *Biological Reviews* 83 (2): 141–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-185X.2008.00036.x.