

Facing Power: A Personal Journey through the Politics of Community Engagement at Universities

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Abstract

In South African higher education institutions, “community engagement” and the politics of knowledge production are highly contested. Intrinsic to the notion of “community engagement” is an ethical commitment to our participants (as co-producers of knowledge), although this does not necessarily mean that we should bow to communities and students at all costs. This article draws from my research and teaching and learning practices as these relate to my attempts at community outreach in Marikana in the North West province and in Thembelihle (an informal settlement in the Gauteng province). This approach is geared towards challenging top-down methods whereby scholars mainly extract from the people and write up their stories in publishing fora that are relatively inaccessible. The article argues that “community engagement” is never an exclusively one-way process even if researchers with relative access to resources seem at face value to define the terms of engagement with both students and research subjects.

Keywords: scholar-activism, participatory action research; *Participation: The New Tyranny?*; decolonial research methods



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Introduction

Over the last 13 years I have developed friends, comrades, and fellow researchers in Thembelihle, which is an informal settlement in the southwest of Johannesburg consisting of about 25,000 people. For example, I trained a coordinator of the highly politicised Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC) to undertake in-depth interviews in the Rustenburg platinum belt and I also wrote press statements in the lead up to protests, including during a four-week long demonstration in 2015, which culminated in the death of one community member and the arrest of about 72 others (Poplak 2015), some of whom I visited while they were in jail. I spent a significant portion of two years after that interviewing, transcribing, and writing up a book history of struggle in Thembelihle. I had promised the 30 or so activists, who had participated in interviews, copies of the book, and that the first launch would take place in Thembelihle itself. Once I had a few dozen books in my possession I spoke with one of the long-standing leaders of the TCC who suggested I attend an executive meeting of their organisation. We developed plans for the launch to take place on 9 June 2023, and I thought, at the time, that everything was in place.

Just prior to the launch, however, I dropped off a copy with another principled activist, and I informed him of plans for the launch. I learned then that I had unintentionally marginalised certain members of the community. After our conversation, I handed over the planning of the event back to the executive, who then took me off the list of speakers altogether despite the fact that I initiated the research process in Thembelihle, wrote and published a book, and was central to the planning of the launch. These experiences suggest that researchers must subject themselves to the internal processes of the organisations or communities in which they co-produce knowledge. Indeed, a decolonial methodological approach (Kovach 2021) necessarily requires that the researcher does not merely extract from communities. This requires a “transformative decolonial praxis [which] reimagine[s] research and displace[s] the hegemony and dominance of Western knowledge systems, which marginalise and delegitimise other epistemological traditions” (Udah 2024, 1). The researcher must maintain a delicate balance between various views and perceptions within the complex “communities” in which they (co)produce and disseminate research. The very act of engagement leads one to inevitably confront tensions and power relations within the community and among various interest groups.

I agree with Motala and Vally (2022) that the notion of “community engagement” within higher education is insufficient since it tends to be an add-on to research ethics and publications and dissemination, rather than a central component of the mission of scholars involved in transforming an unequal and exploitative society. I suggest that the critical literature on “popular participation” and one of its subfields, participatory action research (PAR), provide useful starting points from which to explore the politics, power relations, and ethics embedded in research that involves a degree of community engagement. Initial critiques of the mainstreaming of participation in the broad terrain

of development explored the paradoxical way in which projects defined as empowering or participatory in fact resulted in disempowerment and top-down decision-making outcomes. Cooke and Kothari's *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (2001) questioned the extent to which participatory processes should be abandoned altogether if indeed it was the case that they reinforced structural forms of domination. A more nuanced interpretation, however, suggested that these processes are neither fixed, nor static. As Williams (2004, 557) has argued, the discourse and practice of participation "may indeed be a form of 'subjection', but its consequences are not predetermined and its subjects are never completely controlled".

This framework is employed in this article to evaluate the processes through which I attempted to co-produce two monographs, each of which rely extensively upon indigenous knowledge or indigenous ways of seeing and which confronted me with certain dilemmas and challenges of ethical and "participatory" research. This article draws from my research and teaching and learning at higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa as these relate to my attempts at community outreach and activism in Marikana in the North West province and in Thembelihle (an informal settlement in the southwest of Johannesburg, Gauteng). I highlight in each case the process of building trust and rapport with grassroots movements and individuals, including the way in which I have navigated the contested terrain of "the community". I also question the extent to which knowledge was democratised and I further problematise the relationship between the knowledge of grassroots activists and the teaching and learning process among my students.

The article points to lessons regarding the highly contested terrain of power between researchers and those researched and the need to extend beyond a simplistic binary between undemocratic and so-called democratic ways of doing research. I have been relatively effective at giving precedence in my teaching to the knowledge systems within the communities of struggle where I conduct research, but I fell short in collapsing the boundaries between researcher and the researched, teacher and student, in a way that facilitates dialogue and engagement in the collective struggle for social and economic justice. The final section suggests that to be true to Freirean pedagogy, more horizontal dialogue should take place between the students, activists, and lecturers and that scholarship must explicitly be designed to directly serve the social and economic interests of the communities that researchers engage, but without surrendering their own agency.

Paulo Freire and the Democratisation of Scholarship

In the late 1960s and 1970s participatory action research was adopted as a framework through which the binary between so-called "outsiders" (researchers) and "insiders" could be transformed. Building upon the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and literacy programmes for peasants that were rooted in the lived experience and vocabulary of peasants in Latin America, PAR demonstrated that knowledge can be produced together with marginalised people with the goal of assisting them to become

“conscientised” (see Freire 1970) of their social situation and thus to transform their reality through collective action. These ideals represent the potential for research to contribute towards the reconfiguration of power relationships in society.

With the institutional mainstreaming of bottom-up approaches to development in the 1990s, however, PAR was watered-down into something called participatory research or participatory poverty assessments (PPAs), which aimed to help organisations such as the World Bank to undertake development projects that were more locally appropriate. Rather than “conscientise” the marginalised to change their structural conditions in the world, research was done mostly “on” (rather than with) the marginalised “to provide policy-makers with information about poor people’s perspectives on poverty” (Brock 2002, 1). The World Bank and other international development organisations co-opted the radical ideas of “people’s power” and conscientisation into preconceived projects as a way of imposing neoliberalism and the roll back of the state, as well as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) onto ordinary people in the Global South.

The “slippery” nature of the term enables participation to be used to achieve virtually any outcome (Crewe and Harrison 1998, 73). Mainstream approaches to participation use the concept to achieve efficiency and sustainability in development projects, but it is often a tool to maintain power and authority (see Cooke and Kothari 2001). Building upon Cohen’s (1985) reference to “inclusionary control” one might deduce that in the academic context, social movements and other relatively marginalised actors are brought into research spaces under the veneer of empowerment, and yet their very participation silences or de-radicalises their voice. A pessimistic and static interpretation suggests that community engagement is only necessary to the extent that it enables the researcher to complete their degree or publication. While there exists an impressive literature on the “scholarship of engagement” (see Boyer 1997), Motala and Vally (2022, 5) have pointed out that in South Africa less attention has been given to examining “how such engaged scholarship is constructed in and together with communities ... [who possess] a rich store of educational conceptions, experiences and practices that lie outside the framework of formal education programmes”.

“The imperatives of academic validation”, Motala and Vally (2022, 5) suggest, “militate against the objectives and practices of knowledge co-construction [and democratisation] because of the financial and reputational imperatives associated with accredited publication useful for ranking, career advancement, ratings [and] academic prestige.” This approach necessitates that researchers shift away from their own internal processes in the “ivory tower” university since their ethical commitment is arguably with their participants (as co-producers), although this does not necessarily mean that they should bow to communities at all costs. Critically, “the imperatives of academic validation” and other values and practices of scholars within higher education institutions do not function in a vacuum immune from power relationships. The politics of community engagement is never an exclusively one-way process, even if researchers with relative

access to resources seem at face value to define the terms of engagement as well as the research agenda, data-collection process, write-up, and dissemination of findings.

My own research, teaching, and community outreach over the past decade have been geared towards a desire to challenge the dominant exclusive or top-down approach whereby researchers mainly extract from the people and write up their stories in publishing outlets that are fairly inaccessible. Building upon a Freirean approach, I have attempted to engage in “genuine” dialogue with students and research participants in a way that requires a deep sense of mutual trust. Like Freire (1970), my own approach to teaching and learning is inextricably intertwined with the way I conduct research, which involves in-depth interviews in the oral history tradition as well as field research. I began to understand Paulo Freire as a student myself before connecting Freirean thinking to social movements and research. I first came across Freire’s (1970) classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as an undergraduate student. As an anthropology major with an interest in politics, I was attracted to how Freire centred his approach on understanding power dynamics through the lens of those who are among the most socially and economically marginalised. Reformist approaches, according to Freire, were often distractions intended to obscure the structural or root causes of social problems. The critical pedagogue’s own experience with hunger and poverty unapologetically informed his writings. Before becoming a teenager, Freire pledged “to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger” (Shaull 1970, 10). He opposed the dominant or mainstream system of education whereby “the teacher teaches and the students are taught ... [and] the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” (Freire 1970, 59). Freire instead suggested that students and teachers must meet on equal grounds and learn in dialogue from one another.

Choudry and Vally have argued that “[t]he educative role of social movements and social and political activism is often overlooked within adult education and social movement scholarship” (2018, 3). They insist that “movements are not only significant sites of social and political action, but also... important terrains of learning and knowledge production” (2018, 3). My own teaching and learning approach is inextricably intertwined with my research and is premised on the assumption that social movements or collective actors are important sites of the production of knowledge and of learning (see Vally 2020). In the process of turning the logic of the ivory tower university on its head, I enter communities as a student, and I connect my own students, on fieldtrips for example, to the worldviews of various activists in poor and working-class communities.

Sanjec (1993, 13) has referred to “anthropology’s hidden colonialism”, which underscores the way in which indigenous communities, especially fieldworkers who have often played an invaluable role in the pursuit of knowledge, have been written out of monographs that are often written by one author who is often in a relatively elite position at an academic or other institution. In part as a response to this tendency, I have co-produced histories from below with leaders of grassroots organisations in

multifaceted communities and trained researchers, culminating, for example, in a co-authored book (Sinwell 2023; Sinwell and Mbatha 2016). The social and economic separation between working-class community leaders from townships and informal settlements and me, as a professor from the United States, appears insurmountable at face value, and yet Freire's democratic pedagogy requires a high degree of equality and ultimately trust. Without this, no genuine dialogue or communication can take place either in the classroom or the field. I have attempted to facilitate a process whereby people, who have traditionally been objects of exclusive or top-down research programmes, develop with my students in Urban Sociology and Social Impact Assessment (two postgraduate modules that I teach or coordinate) a locally specific interpretation of racial capitalism, urban planning, *in situ* upgrading, the housing crisis, and critical race theory. My research approach is centred on listening to the views of ordinary people while building trust and rapport with the mineworkers who had been victims of state violence, murder, assassination, and torture.

This pushes the boundaries of what normally constitutes community engagement and high ethical standards, especially in Marikana and other communities beset with violence and conflict (see also Sinwell 2022). From this perspective, the scholar seeks to understand and transform society in *partnership* with the marginalised and dispossessed. For the oral historian and field researcher, knowledge is of course co-constructed, but many perhaps fail to acknowledge the extent to which the people become teachers and the researcher the humble student. For any Freirean within or outside of academic institutions, the knowledge systems of ordinary people and students are paramount, and a main objective of the teaching and learning process is to nurture a sense of faith and trust in our ability to change the world. A conducive environment and safe space of engagement where students' knowledge is valued as much as one's own arguably provides a sense of democracy within the classroom and on fieldtrips to the sites where I have ongoing research projects.

Having provided the theory and context in which I began to adopt a critical pedagogy, the next section demonstrates that I have built relationships of trust as a researcher. In the section thereafter, I suggest that this approach requires trust in ordinary people to extend to the classroom because students learn directly about political activists through field visits and guest lectures. This principle, like all teaching and learning approaches, occasionally backfires, and must be shaped depending on the context. The section thereafter problematises what has arguably become the dominant mode of "community engagement" whereby students and lecturers learn from communities of struggle, but the latter are neither adequately engaged with as a contested terrain of power nor do they necessarily benefit substantively from the partnership with scholars.

The “Problem Posing Educator” and Experiential Learning in Communities of Struggle

Freire’s idea of the “problem posing educator” indicates that there is a dialectical (rather than one-way or top-down) relationship between the knowledge that the supervisor or teacher holds and that which the student carries (see also Darder 2015, 2018). This guides my own supervision practices at master’s and doctoral level and helped create a situation in which I was able to question my own class-analysis and Marxist theoretical assumptions considering students’ interest in and experiences with “race” and gender relations, and therefore the need for a more intersectional approach. Since 2020, I have supervised master’s and doctoral students in a wide variety of subjects including women’s activism in social media, labour value and teaching and learning at higher education institutions in South Africa in a post-COVID world, and repression and resistance in contemporary Zimbabwe.

A doctoral student who I began to supervise in early 2023 is from a rural area in the former Ciskei, and who wishes to undertake oral history research on the political economy of labour tenants. We developed a strong intellectual connection that allows the kind of mentorship that Freire seemed to have in mind when he wrote about the role of the teacher in education. The student is taken seriously, trusted, and is likely to be more open to mentorship and advice. The student had the following to say:

[The supervisor’s] approach to supervision is one that allows the student to express and articulate themselves freely and to think independently while simultaneously providing guidance with profound clarity, challenging/constructive criticism, and direction. My experience of ... [his] supervision is that, it encourages me to regard myself as a capable intellectual whose opinion matters, making it very easy for me to share my thoughts, challenges and anxieties in the process. (Supervision Evaluation 2023)

Within the dominant paradigm of education, students tend to be viewed as “containers” to be filled by the teachers who “deposit” knowledge and insight (Freire 1970, 72). Nichols (2017) refers to the South African case, which has been deeply entrenched with top-down educational practices in which the teacher is necessarily the “knower”, and the learner is defined by the absence of knowledge. “The initial impulse [of writing consultants or lecturers] is often to prove their authority”, she observes, “so they panic when they realise that they might not know all the answers” (Nichols 2017, 38). As they gain more experience, however, they begin to understand that “their job is rather to develop the client’s authority, to listen to the client’s thinking and to help the client to listen to their own voice and to develop their own views in relation to others” (Nichols 2017, 38). Indeed, education for liberation requires that we “begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire 1970, 72).

While this approach has mostly achieved positive results, at times my drive towards egalitarian relationships with students has backfired. I have not always cautioned

“students of potential problems in advance” or made students as aware as they should be of the “university’s regulations regarding postgraduate studies” (Student Evaluation 2023). While a mentor in the Freirean sense is intended to meet on equal grounds and suggests that neither party has knowledge that is superior to that of the other, in fact the role of the supervisor in a relatively managerial university is arguably to advise students about what is likely to come and to consistently highlight the importance of deadlines. While my supervision reputation indicates that I have been relatively effective in this regard, in certain cases I have slipped. I therefore have committed myself to spending more time early in the supervision process going over what our university calls the student-supervisor agreement (SSA), and I increasingly request emails from each student after a supervision session to indicate what was discussed in the meeting and our agreed-to deadlines.

In 2020, I taught a second-year module of about 550 students called Population, Health and the Environment. I was among the lecturers who successfully shifted to fully online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, which in the sociology department was accompanied by a notable shift from rote learning for examinations in the lecture hall to a greater emphasis on critical thinking required for take-home essays. Each module I teach begins with a critical discussion of the teacher-student relationship, but I also identify innovative ways in which to approach topics from a social justice perspective, including by referring to current events such as BlackLivesMatter. For instance, in 2021, I taught Population, Health and the Environment again. According to my study guide I encouraged “creative thinking about the possibilities for social change in the context of what is arguably best described as structural violence” (Study Guide 2021). I sought to demonstrate the ways in which COVID-19 and climate change disproportionately affect those living in the Global South, especially low-income women of colour. Drawing connections between policing of black men, the healthcare system, and environmental degradation, which inflict “slow” or structural violence onto disadvantaged groups, I noted that “[s]tudents will be expected to link this concept to the main themes in the module” (Study Guide 2021).

I have also used experiential learning since 2017 when I began to teach the Urban Sociology (honours) module in the sociology department, hosting dialogue between community-based activists in Thembelihle and my students. The major assignment involved students forming their own research questions in consultation with me and then attempting to answer these after undertaking their fieldtrip. Students were required to effectively articulate the connection between a specific theory in the class and the case study of Thembelihle. As a coordinator of the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) Short Learning Programme since 2022, I built upon the essential work of Asanda Benya (2015) who undertook field research on social reproduction and “the invisible [women’s] hands” of Marikana, a mining area (which mainly employs men) that tended to be understood mainly through the eyes and arguably on the terms of men in a patriarchal society. I managed SIA practitioners who teach aspects of the module, and I take my students on a fieldtrip each year to meet the women of Marikana so that they

can understand theories of power, “race”, gender, and class through the lens of ordinary people. This has helped prepare students for master’s research and critical thinking in the real world. One diploma student has expressed gratitude earlier this year in email correspondence with me:

I just wanted to extend my appreciation, for all your efforts in helping students to be successfully enrolled on the programme. Coordination, and making sure that we study recent and updated material. Studying Social Impact Assessment is a dream come true. Lectures were excellent, study material, assignments were excellent, they forced us to study those articles and empower ourselves in Social Impact Assessment discipline. I look forward for the next classes. (Student Evaluation 2023)

One student summarised the impact of experiential learning in the module:

Going to the site itself does more justice than reading about it, hearing about it, or watching television documentaries about it. The 2023 Social Impact Assessment class had the honour of meeting with the workers and community members present on the day the horrible events occurred. (Student Evaluation 2023)

By physically entering a space where people have paradoxically been the victims of institutional mechanisms purportedly designed to serve their interests, including SIAs and social labour plans, students’ thought processes inevitably shift away from top-down orientations (as in the practice of SIA), which tend to provide window-dressing solutions to questions of indigenous knowledge systems and gender empowerment. The students were able to learn from activists and community members on the receiving end of the democratic deficit within SIA. Knowledge, in the main, is not only shaped by a white middle-class male, but the door is opened for dialogue between students, those who are excluded from development, and the teacher as facilitator. Hence the student has eloquently suggested that they undergo a paradigm shift in how they think about questions of power and politics in SIA:

It is evident from this experience that we need to reconsider and reimagine the methods by which we involve the public in development projects. Community perspectives cannot be considered essential solely on paper, yet in reality they routinely play a peripheral role. Big business must be held responsible for the promises it makes on its social and labour plans because, at the moment, it appears that these commitments are only made in an effort to be awarded operational rights. (Student Evaluation 2023)

My own research seeks to uncover possibilities for ordinary people to transform socio-economic conditions as well as the terms upon which decisions are made. I have exposed students to the ways in which individual and collective actors exercise power from below, but I have also suggested possible pitfalls that must be overcome when Freirean philosophy, centred on forging equality between students and teachers, confronts a managerial university with strict quantitative delivery targets. The next section indicates that a one-way approach, whereby lecturers and their students learn from the people on the ground through field visits to communities, is insufficient. A

more dialogical relationship between teachers, students, *and* communities is necessary if we are to take seriously the question of societal impact in our scholarship.

Intersections: The Two-Way Street of Teaching and Learning and the Power to Change

Because Freirean pedagogy requires breaking the binary between student and teacher, researcher and researched, the people (the oppressed, the students, and the researched) must exert power over decision-making processes within and beyond the classroom. Building theory from the ground up, that is, grounded theory or histories from below, the approach often centres around “listening” to the people. This sounds nice in and of itself, but the politics of listening and the profiling of specific voices are highly contested and potentially treacherous terrain. Indeed, I have argued in my most recent book that the very idea of amplifying “voice” tends to be a quick fix incapable of delivering concrete and lasting change (see Sinwell 2022). The history-from-below approach urges us to listen to ordinary people at the grassroots and to tell their histories, but this approach on its own falls short in honouring the legacy of Paulo Freire, who points to a situation in which those who maintain the status quo

talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his [sic] trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour without that trust. (Freire 1970, 6)

While there are shifting relations of power and unevenness in any interaction, my students in Urban Sociology and SIA mainly learned from grassroots activists in Thembelihle and Marikana, respectively. It should be clear that various forms of knowledge have filtered down from the poor and dispossessed to the students, but the extent to which it served their (community) interests is in question. Similarly, in my own research, I write down and record what people tell me for outputs such as books and articles, but beyond this, there is arguably little attempt to forge a dialogical relationship centred around a collective commitment to social justice. Too often researchers decide what they will study and whom they will interview as well as when the findings will be released and on whose terms. Put simply, research frameworks suggest that researchers do not trust the people and relatedly that the processes by which they do research are relatively undemocratic. Similarly, in the classroom, it is the lecturers who determine the syllabus, the readings, essentially the curriculum, and methods of assessment.

I now return to the vignette with which I opened this article. The preparation for the first launch of my 2023 book (Sinwell 2023), which was co-hosted by the people of Thembelihle, highlights the possibility for an alternative approach. Indeed, even a book launch is an inherently political exercise and one that involves teaching and learning. While initially I came to Thembelihle in 2011 as an activist to provide solidarity with a community that was being excluded from decision-making processes at the local

government level, by 2019 I was determined to conduct research to produce a people's history of the area. I attended a general meeting of the Thembelihle Crisis Committee that year and explained to them the project. The meeting decided unanimously that I should begin the interview process, but it was only when I reapproached the crisis committee in May 2023 to launch the book that resistance came from various sides of the community who understandably wanted to play a role in shaping the programme. Initially, I had met with one person from Thembelihle who I regarded as representative and a few other scholars and students, and we drafted the programme.

But when I met one of the leading activists at Planact, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that encourages people's participation in local development, he respectfully told me that I was imposing my own agenda onto the community launch. The TCC discussed the matter, and, at some point, though I was to be present distributing books for free to the participants on the day, I was not on the programme.

Soon enough, however, a negotiation was reached as I remained on the programme with a list of several activists from Thembelihle. "Authority was performed", in a similar way as Nichols (2014, 904) describes in her own context at the Wits Writing Centre (WWC), "and the initiator of authority and participants in bestowing authority, were changed" (904). The launch was an immense success in part because of this. Many activists shook my hand and thanked me for producing a piece of work that their grandchildren would read (Makoro and Sinwell 2023). This was only possible, I believe, because I was subjected to a collective process of decision-making. The contested terrain of power in different spaces conflicted momentarily (one an elite space and another in the community), highlighting that "listening" in the classroom or in the field is a political exercise.

My engagement with the people of Marikana also shifted when a colleague of mine and I visited one of the women organisers in Marikana who speak to my SIA students in Marikana each year below the *koppie* (hillside) where the fateful massacre of 34 mine workers took place in 2012. She lives in one of the mining apartments outside Marikana. I recall my colleague saying to me that we are always grateful when they join us at our public meetings in Johannesburg, but we should also go to them and hear what they want to do. They had formed a new organisation, Sinethemba (we are hopeful), which provides livelihoods through sewing and beadwork for the women of Marikana, but it also seeks to hold the government and mining companies to account. They were adamant that they wanted a meeting with President Cyril Ramaphosa. After partnering with Sinethemba to organise a meeting with various stakeholders in Marikana, Thumeka asked our centre to send a letter on their behalf to the President. The letter indicates:

On the 21st of October 2022, various stakeholders in Marikana including Sinethemba Women's Organisation ... Marikana Peace Building Team met to discuss the status of development in Marikana since 16 August 2012. In this meeting we noted that instead of our living conditions improving, they have only gotten worse over the last decade. We have patiently tried many available avenues to address the government and the

mining companies, but our humble pleas have fallen on deaf ears. We engaged relevant authorities in the ANC [African National Congress], the EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters], the mines [Lonmin and now Sibanye], but nothing has changed. We are therefore of the view that this is a national concern. We believe that you, President Ramaphosa, are in a strong position to partner with us to address what we understand to be rising unemployment, poor service delivery and violence. (Sinthemba 2022)

In conversation between Sinthemba Women's Organisation in Marikana and the Office of the South African President (Cyril Ramaphosa), I drafted a memorandum aimed at holding the government and mining companies accountable to the residents of Marikana. My teaching philosophy is intimately tied to notions of solidarity with the oppressed and is based on the idea that to maintain trust with the people the teacher must engage with struggles on their own terms. Researchers must confront the same dangers as the people and take on the risks associated with their struggles.

As project coordinator of a research centre at the University of Johannesburg from 2021 to 2023 called the Centre for Sociological Research and Practice (CSRP), I aimed with Trevor Ngwane and others to build upon this approach in a systematic way. Our centre challenged methodological approaches in higher education that merely "extract" from communities. Pointing towards the need to build theory from the ground up, the CSRP strived towards producing "Radical Scholarship with and for the People". Our research (Maggott et al. 2022) generated an impressive amount of public interest and was shared through seminars, community workshops, and presentations at academic conferences, and arguably shaped the national discourse around electricity load shedding. In 2021, I made use of online teaching whereby students undertook research in Urban Sociology, reporting on the energy crisis in the townships and other communities where their families live in Orange Farm and Brixton. The urban theory, including racial capitalism, was unpacked based on how energy deprivation is experienced in their families' homes.

At the height of the public conversation on xenophobia sparked by repeated well-publicised physical and verbal attacks on immigrants in early 2022, we activated the legitimate scholarly platform of the CSRP to intervene. I co-convened and chaired two seminars that culminated in a hybrid meeting in which a human rights campaign organisation, the Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX), was formed. My involvement with the people of Thembelihle also should be highlighted here. Since the TCC are winners of the Mkhaya Migrants Award for "Most Integrated Community in South Africa", they were invited to speak to KAAX and various other civil society formations and scholars. One resident from Thembelihle, Sipiwe Segodi, was part of a panel I was on which posed the question, "Why is the idea of standing up for what is rightfully yours being used to justify xenophobia under Operation Dudula while this was also used to challenge xenophobia in Thembelihle?" While scholars I have worked with at the centre have taken genuine steps to integrate leaders of complex communities into the teaching and learning and research process at the university, we still have a way to go until we are able to develop a systematic plan to ensure that their involvement leads them to become relatively equal partners in a collective scholarly project.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning are dialectical processes imbued with power relations within and between heterogeneous communities, students, and academics. “The tyranny of participation” (Cooke and Kothari 2001) refers to the unjust imposition of power or authority through the veneer of empowerment of local knowledge. This paradox poses questions to teachers and students in the classroom who are faced with “embedded knowledges” (see Jansen 2009) that may normalise and reinforce historical relations of inequality and oppression. Challenging the assumption that elites, government officials, and those at higher education institutions are the primary legitimate sites of knowledge production, it is on the one hand welcome when researchers develop a pedagogy and scholarship that is rooted in the knowledge systems that ordinary people such as mineworkers, shack dwellers, township residents, and students possess. It is hoped that when our former students seek work in non-governmental organisations, the corporate world or government, they will recall the need to include the voices of those affected and often dispossessed by development. On the other hand, even this cannot guarantee that people’s knowledges will be granted a degree of legitimacy in the corridors of power. Most urgent in higher education institutions is the need to facilitate in a systemic way the creation of spaces within the academy whereby grassroots activists, students, and researchers can engage in a dialogical and relatively democratic process of reflection and action to challenge the status quo.

The narrative presented in this article demonstrates that any purportedly non-extractive research project should not be treated as a once-off event and does not necessarily have an absolute beginning and end. Building upon aspects of the critique of participatory processes in politics and society indicates that scholarship and teaching about communities are an unjust imposition to the extent that the people of Marikana and Thembelihle are unable to subject those at universities with relative privilege to their rules, norms, and procedures. This suggests that the thrust for ethical and just research must come from social movements themselves, otherwise it will rely only upon the good (or bad) will of individual scholars. Research on social movements and popular organisations is implicitly often focused on power (and engagement with authority) and yet within the space of universities, grassroots actors’ ability to reclaim power from below (from the institutions through which they may be approached to become “partners” on the terms of the former) is given relatively scant attention. Perhaps an academic journal is not the most appropriate outlet for this kind of debate, but the journal, *Education as Change*, espouses radical democratic ideals and is unambiguous about its preference for educational and political research about disadvantaged communities. The fact that articles are open access means that, at the very least, activists do not need to rely on university subscriptions to read them.

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