CHAPTER 11

Community Engagement as Fabric in Which to Weave in Teaching/Learning and Research

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Introduction

Higher education around the world struggles in the cauldron of socio-economic and political upheavals and with the impact of the neoliberal imaginations of governments across the world; the growing influence of technology in the core activities of universities; and the impact of vast changes in the modes of industrial production globally. Thus, its purposes and roles are in transition. At one end of the spectrum, Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (1996) invokes a rather bleak, pessimistic view about the future of the social institution of higher education. This is counterbalanced by a range of policy-provoking writings that implore national governments to invest more heavily in higher education as a necessary condition for the construction of democratic, egalitarian societies (World Bank, 2002; UNESCO, 2009). As these transitions in the purpose and roles of higher education emerge, so does that of community engagement (CE) that is currently going through a rethinking of its purpose.

As demand for higher education continues to grow at unprecedented levels, partly as a response to the needs of the knowledge economy, partly because of the democratization of the education systems, the shift from elite to mass-based systems becomes apparent (Sharma, 2012). These global shifts provide us with new opportunities to reimagine CE even when there is a broad global consensus on its importance. For instance, as massification takes hold, the
idea of CE as a mechanism for the young of privileged elites to spend time and to work in “poor” communities changes. We must now create the opportunity for students to engage in the theory-praxis complex in the kinds of communities in which they have grown up and developed—communities that they know well. These are very different projects. In some ways, this chapter addresses the transitions in CE as it continues to struggle to take hold in the core of higher education.

South Africa has a rich history of university-community engagement, and its theory and practice have been studied in great detail. Several national conferences have been convened and the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) maintains an ongoing intellectual and practical investment in the growth of CE. The Council on Higher Education, at one such conference, asked Martin Hall to present an analysis, and this has been very effective in providing the basis for the emergence of a robust debate (Hall, 2010). It is current and it captures the key points. The Higher Education White Paper of 1997, which preceded the Higher Education Act of the same year (Ministry of Education, 1997), has, as its tagline, an agenda for the transformation of higher education. It identified teaching, research, and CE as the three pillars of the system. CE is described in the white paper in a political form: as a way in which universities are called upon to “demonstrate social responsibility . . . and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes”—a way to build legitimacy, something South African higher education struggles with in powerful places. An underlying theme of the white paper referred to above is the role of higher education in generating a civic consciousness among graduates and academics and to “promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes” (1997, p. 10). That white paper emerged from a large, all-embracing, consultative process, and so we can be sure that the expectation that universities would embark on CE as a core activity is well established in policy. In fact, higher education in South Africa has engaged for more than five decades in a very rich, contested, challenging, diverse set of activities and intellectual engagement that span the whole spectrum of CE—with some success and some failure.

It is, however, a good time for a process of rethinking, reimaging of CE—to revisit it in all its imaginations, to understand why it is that it has yet to capture the commitment and imagination of faculty and administrators at institutions of higher learning. Are there new approaches to be explored? Why has this rich history failed to secure a place for CE at the center of higher education?