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Your Campus Electronic Newsletter

16 July 2020

Volume: 8

Issue: 31 Top row from left: Dr Angela James, Dr Anissa Mc Neil and Dr Eugene Machimana. Second row: Dr Jugathambal Ramdhani, Dr Frances O'Brien and Professor Jennifer Subban. Third row: Mr Luthando Fundzo, Ms Melanie Sadeck and Professor Lesley Wood.



Questions about how students can involve themselves in Service-Learning during the wild fire COVID-19 pandemic formed the subject for debate at a forum hosted by the Community Engagement sector in UKZN's School of Education, featuring both local and international academics.

The discussions took place against a backdrop of both academics and practitioners working in the field of Service-Learning (SL) faced with the harsh realities of infection and social distancing, among other factors, while they strive to meet student expectations of working closely with communities. The situation is demanding - even threatening - but could be viewed as an opportunity to re-imagine how students can be involved.

Questions asked include: How can students be engaged in Service-Learning during these times? What are the constraints and possibilities for this engagement?

Below is a selection of the opinions and comments expressed by academics and others at the forum:

**Dr Frances O'Brien**, Service-Learning practitioner and researcher, offered an inclusive framework for Service-Learning, one that involved the following four Discourses:

'(1) Scholarly Engagement, that focuses on knowledge and research. Such engagement is likely to be interdisciplinary and, in the current context, to prioritise online aides for reflection and demonstration of learning. (2) Benevolent Engagement, characterised by the offering of services and demonstration of skills. In the COVID-19 context, relationships with diverse service providers would be prioritised. (3) Democratic Engagement comprises Service-Learning for the purpose of social change. In this Discourse in current times, students themselves may comprise as "community". The development of online resources would aim to promote advocacy and equitable participation. (4) The Professional Engagement Discourse focuses on human resources. In this Discourse, internships, articles, work integrated learning (WIL), and practical or fieldwork allow service-learning in line with professional bodies' requirements. In the re-imagined context, service-learning in professional workspaces may have to be substituted by scenarios and case studies.

'We need to consider that before students can conduct Service-Learning, the professional preparation needed should be prescribed and the timing planned - so bring all the theories into the first half of the module and at the end, the practice and the second option is to do it vice-versa,' said O'Brien. 'An important aspect to consider is that working across the discourses, relationships with organisations in the community are vital.'

**Ms Jacqui Scheepers**, Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Manager at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT): 'We are expected now to work online - this is a time for deep reflection and introspection. Reflection is often a neglected part of the process of learning and now that we are not in the classroom, we have to think of other ways for students to develop cognitive relationships with the curriculum. The reality is that students are working with more responsibilities and self-reflection therefore it becomes even more important. As academics we have been presenting workshops on-line but still have to use academic rigour to meet all the learning outcomes. This is challenging in this current context considering the reduced time that we now have and that our Service-Learning projects were usually face-to face.

'We operate with four main modalities: (1) Work-Directed Learning (industry context); (2) Problem-Based Learning (relevant to communities); (3) Project-Based Learning, and (4) Workplace Learning (and alternative spaces for students to have placements in a community context). In Project-Based Learning, which is the main modality for Service-Learning, we have to ask questions about how we need to re-imagine face-to-face Service-Learning. In this work, project leadership is important as the

projects need to be planned and implemented by the respective project groups. This is challenging especially with project-based trans-disciplinary projects - Who will manage these as there are many disciplines all working on the same challenge at the same time? 'We could use Blackboard or other e-learning platforms and place students into teams to work on trans-disciplinary projects. The topic is not the only issue to consider, it is the learning journey that is critical. There exists the possibility that assessments linked to projects could be changed to e-learning portfolio assessments.

'Service-Learning projects usually involve community site visits, but this is not possible now. Instead universities should capitalise on their project partnerships to re-engineer their Service-Learning projects. Social entrepreneurship projects are good examples of co-operation between universities and society. For example, the making of masks, which involves different skills and expertise and create employment opportunities in communities. Consider this: What projects can students do at home/in their neighbourhood? Students could investigate whether people are social distancing and what is happening to the businesses in their community? There could be campus-based projects, with the campus as a site of learning. Other project examples are where engineering and horticulture students can work with the student residences and school projects involving the mentoring of school learners online using WhatsApp and other social media platforms.' Researchers can also be involved as the scholarship of engagement is important. As long as the projects to be undertaken benefit society.

**Dr Anissa Mc Neil**, founder and Chief Executive Officer of Education Works Consulting Firm, Inc in Los Angeles in the United States, spoke on SL in the context of COVID-19 from a Community Engagement perspective as an international educational leader working in six countries:

'Three significant things are needed: action research, needs assessment, and a 360-degree impact assessment.

'SL is in the midst of a crisis and there should be action research because we are in a community, another environment and completing a project or a piece of research. A theoretical project without impact to a community will not be well received.

'Also, it is important to work on identifying the needs of the community by doing a needs assessment. The needs assessment in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic should identify a need that the community can put their arms around. One of the activities that could be carried out is using technology to do health information webinars in the community which may not have the best health information.

'A 360-degree impact assessment is warranted - one should ask: does this project have an impact on students and on student learning; does this project have an impact on the community and to what degree does it have this impact? Also does this project have an impact for the participants? So, if we gauge our SL by impact and a need, then we're going to be able to identify those projects that are worth-while and beneficial for our communities and not merely from a theoretical point of view. Every project should have the community and participants' arms wrapped around it, so that the university becomes another arm of the community and not just a statue of academic learning.'

**Dr Jugathambal Ramdhani**, a UKZN academic, said her thinking about SL was linked to an *Ubuntu* SL approach that transcended into the virtual and practical space so the focus was on how do we take responsibility in terms of what's happening especially now in the COVID-19 context. A question that we need to address in re-thinking about SL is how do the students become genuinely committed?

Students would usually go into the schools during teaching practice to work with the learners and entrepreneurship projects, developing, say for example, an entrepreneurial idea, putting it into

practice and rolling it out into the communities as well. Now, we need to consider how to incorporate digital technologies and e-Service-Learning. We do need to look at our university sites, the issue of poverty, the large number of unemployed persons, 195 million jobs that could be lost globally, and the issue of food security - the issue of access rather than shortage of food, and that malnutrition rather than hunger will result. We need to ask how we can use business product ideas to assist with interventions to achieve a carbon neutral environment and to minimise the harmful effects of climate change. This will entail the University creating partnerships for example through scholarship of engagement between the Economic Management Studies, the University and the students' home communities working on an entrepreneurship project idea that can respond to the economic, social, the civic and the moral problems. Students will be expected to create prototypes in the e-classroom and to share them with their communities... and this becomes a larger project. They can do video presentations of this entrepreneurship addressing poverty and to create a carbon neutral environment. We should leave it to the students to decide on what to work with in their virtual groupings, using Moodle and on how they will use the virtual approaches to engage with these communities of choice, and also how to address the issue of exclusion.'

**Mr Luthando Fundzo**, a first-year Natural Sciences and Life Sciences teacher who completed the Research and Service-Learning module undertaken by third-year pre-service Biological Sciences students, posed the following question: 'What is the significance of teachers giving learners SL projects during this pandemic and how did the SL course at university equip me to infuse SL in the school curriculum?

'It is important that teachers give learners projects that inform them and make them aware of the pandemic in a more practical way. Experiential learning and the responsibilities that are linked to the project are important. The learners could use the knowledge they have of what a virus is, which is what we teach in Grade eight and how it spreads and how people are infected? And 'Why it is a respiratory illness from what we teach in Grade nine. The SL project could engage them in working with communities and exploring their knowledge of what this pandemic is and the measures that can be taken to prevent the spread. This also increases the likelihood for them to establish what the pandemic is and their experiences among themselves and their families. So this S-L learning project, will actually groom them to be able to know which stream or career choice to make. So basically, I wanted to emphasise what was said earlier that when we are administering these projects with the learners – take into account their environment, the needs of the community and then we'll be able to administer these kinds of projects.'

**Professor Jennifer Subban**, Interim director of the Office of Service Learning and Community Engagement, Wright State University in the United States works with Masters of Public Administration students on Strategic Planning and programme evaluation. 'The organisations we will work with will focus attention around the impact of COVID-19 and this will affect the class. We are not on campus and not allowed to have face-to-face meetings. Our contact is via Zoom or a platform that we use at the university. The objectives of the course are: learn to lead and manage strategic planning process while contributing to the work of public agencies, analyse synthesise and engage in critical thinking around critical issues for the communities or the organisations that we work with, apply a public service perspective to their work and finally communicate and interact productively with a diverse group - changing workforce and citizenry.'

'So I hope at the end of my courses students will demonstrate an understanding of the role of strategic planning for these organisations in terms of programme evaluation tools for programme evaluation approaches to programme evaluation relevant to the particular organisations and the kinds of work they're trying to do. I also trust they have learnt to manage this information and these processes that are related to strategic planning and programme evaluation and are able to present a document to

the agency that they could use to effectively, think about and engage their service populations and staff. It is important that the students also have to learn how to communicate around these issues, how to facilitate inquiry from the point of view of the agencies, and have the ability to collect data as well.

‘And so how are we going to do this in an era where we do not have face-to-face communication? We will have to work online with focus groups who will engage with the service population so that we have a better understanding of the communities’ needs and nuances. The organisations will have to frame their work around what's relevant to the community.’

**Dr Eugene Machimana**, Senior Education Consultant, Curricular Community Engagement at the University of Pretoria, supported the move away from just getting into community engagement for the theoretical aspect part of it. Rather service and learning should have equal standing to provide a service that addresses real issues in the community.

**Professor Lesley Wood**, Director - Community-based Educational Research (COMBER) in the Faculty of Education at North-West University said: ‘There is a need to keep sharing ideas because everybody has different ideas and I think this is an amazing opportunity for us to rethink how we do Service-Learning and Community-based research, because if we ask people what they want and what they need, then we can go from there.’

**Ms Melanie Sadeck**, Head of Department, Teacher Professional Development at CPUT, said they had many ideas, for example a water purification project at rural schools in the Western Cape and these ideas should be shared. ‘To enhance Service-Learning we do need to look at writing proposals around capacity development with communities and how they can access the services we work with.’

**Dr Angela James**, Academic Leader: Community Engagement and a senior lecturer in Science Education at UKZN’s School of Education, said: ‘For all the communities we are working with - and we are a community within ourselves - we need to see Service-Learning on its own if we want change to happen in South Africa. It will be from our students, especially those concerned with Service-Learning and not just Community Engagement. It is such a rich environment - when you share what work students do with communities, it is phenomenal. We do need to consider how much more will be expected after COVID-19?’

‘The question to ask is: Are we waiting for things to be brought to us or are we, in collaboration with our communities, preparing for what is going to happen? We don’t know. But, how flexible are we to work with this?’

Words: [Angela James](#)

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