Community Engagement Research: A Question of Partnership

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ABSTRACT

This paper puts forward a research framework within which future community engagement initiatives can be delivered and evaluated. The framework, known as the ‘methodology of engagement’, has been developed from reviews of and research within a number of community engagement projects that have been carried out by Australian Catholic University, and recently by the university’s new Institute for Advancing Community Engagement. Within the Institute’s community engagement research methodology, the participants in an initiative are active collaborators in the research process; they are not subjects to be studied and examined. The participants work with university investigators to shape the direction of evaluations and to formulate research questions. They share ownership of the research and make crucial contributions to the way in which it is conducted and documented. The methodology of engagement was developed in order to address the need for community members to feel genuinely engaged in the research carried out in their communities, and to feel respected and dignified in the process. The methodology ensures that community members are partners not only in the implementation of community projects but in their evaluation as well. The present paper reports on the origins and nature of this research methodology, and how it has been employed within the Institute’s recent projects. The paper suggests principles by which to address the issues that arise in the utilisation of the methodology, and discusses what lies ahead as the methodology continues to expand and evolve.
In recent years, the importance of community engagement has been increasingly recognised by universities throughout the world. A substantial amount of work has already been done with regard to illuminating the nature of community engagement and how best to practice it, but there is much that remains to be learnt. The present paper provides a partnership model for planning, implementing, and evaluating community engagement initiatives. The model aims to guide future practitioners and community workers while also facilitating a fuller understanding of community engagement and its various dimensions. For the sake of concision, this paper focuses primarily on community engagement initiatives in which universities and their staff and students engage and work with community members. Nonetheless, it is argued that the partnership model of community engagement advanced in this paper can be employed with regard to any community engagement initiative, such as those developed by community organisations, welfare agencies, and charitable institutions.

**Community Engagement Defined**

Australian Catholic University (ACU National) defines community engagement as:

…the process through which ACU National brings the capabilities of its staff and students to work collaboratively with community groups and organisations to achieve mutually agreed goals that build capacity, improve wellbeing, and produce just and sustainable outcomes in the interests of people, communities, and the University (Australian Catholic University, 2007).

From this definition, it is clear that ACU views community engagement in terms of collaboration and mutuality, that is, in terms of partnership. In the following sections, it is argued that partnership is the key component of any successful community engagement initiative. Partnership sets genuine community engagement efforts apart from other work carried out in communities, and it provides a basis for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of community engagement.

**Service and Engagement: A Key Distinction**

To illustrate the crucial role of partnership in community engagement, it is useful to look at the difference between community service and community engagement. Community service can be understood as an evolutionary precursor to community engagement. While there is no doubt that, in the past, community service initiatives have led to significant benefits for a wide range of communities, these initiatives were missing key elements that could have enhanced their efficacy and sustainability.

Community service is transactional. Within the university context, community service would involve the staff or students of a university performing some service for a given community, in order to benefit the community members in some way. The community members would be passive recipients of this service, consuming it to the extent that they are willing or able to do so. By the same token, the staff or students would be service providers, dispensing their prescribed services to the community (Howard, Butcher, & Labone, 2003).

In contrast, community engagement is transformative (Howard, Cooke, & Butcher, 2007). Within the university context, community engagement brings about change not only in the lives of community members, but in the lives of staff and students from the university. The direction of influence is not one-way: both the university and the community are transformed, and the
benefits of this process are mutual (Jobling & Nanere, 2007). How is this bidirectionality of influence accomplished? Through partnership; through the extensive collaboration that takes place between university and community, whereby community members are active agents rather than passive recipients, and university staff and students acquire knowledge from and are transformed by the engagement.

For a community-based initiative to be truly one of engagement, the collaboration must extend beyond the planning and implementation of the initiative into its evaluation phase. That is, community members need to be active partners in the process of devising and implementing a research strategy for assessing the impact of a given initiative. Just as, in the delivery phase, the community members are agents rather than recipients, in the evaluation phase, they are active, engaged collaborators rather than mere subjects to be studied and tested. They are participants in the fullest sense of the word: they participate not only in the data-gathering procedures but in their planning and development as well. This inclusiveness allows the evaluation phase to be valuably informed by the insights and perspectives of community members, to be tailored to their needs, sensitivities, and circumstances, and to offer them the dignity and respect that are often felt to be lacking in program evaluations.

**The Benefits of Partnership**

The following discussion presents the findings from a range of community-based initiatives, to illustrate that community engagement is preferable in practice as well as in principle. When an initiative forges an authentic partnership between university and community, rather than simply building a one-way, transactional conduit for services, the benefits – for both community and university – are clear.

In a trial of two forms of community-based education, Kristina, Majoor, and van der Vleuten (2006) tested the importance of active community involvement. The trial compared two groups of sixth-year medical students, both of which were posted to rural areas of Indonesia for two-weeks, in order to help identify and treat community health problems. The control group performed their community-based education duties in accordance with the established protocols, which did not emphasise consultation or collaboration with community members. The experimental group followed a set of newly designed objectives, which stressed the importance of listening to and co-operating with the community, and provided a framework for working collaboratively with community members. Unlike the experimental group, the control group delivered their health interventions without discussion with the community, and the results of their interventions were not communicated to the community.

As predicted, significantly different outcomes were observed for the two groups. The interventions delivered by the experimental group were met with high levels of community compliance (65-80%), while the control group measured compliance for only one of their activities, and in this case the compliance was low (28%). In other words, it seems likely that the community members were more willing to follow the health advice provided by the medical students from the experimental group. Community perceptions were also measured, and it was found that the proportion of community representatives who agreed that the students had responded to community-perceived needs, and who expressed satisfaction with the students’ activities, was significantly higher for the experimental group. Most of the community representatives who received interventions from the control group expressed some level of dissatisfaction with the students’ activities, while the representatives who had been engaged by the experimental group were prepared to recommend the group’s activities for future groups of
students. In all, the evidence suggested that community health needs were more likely to be met by the students from the experimental group, whose objectives emphasised community consultation and involvement.

On numerous measures of the students’ satisfaction with their experiences in the community, with their teamwork experiences, and with the community-based education program as a whole, the experimental group scored higher than the control group. Thus, not only were the activities of the experimental group more satisfactory for the community, but they were more satisfactory for the students themselves. These results point to the mutually beneficial nature of community engagement, and explain why community-based initiatives are more successful and sustainable when they emphasise engagement: when community workers are more satisfied with their activities, they are more likely to work with dedication and commitment, and to remain in their roles for a greater length of time. By the same token, when community members are more satisfied with the initiatives delivered within their communities, they are more likely to recommend that the initiatives be continued, and that similar initiatives be implemented in other communities. Indeed, without the endorsement, support, and involvement of the community, it is, at best, very difficult for a community initiative to be implemented, maintained, or expanded. Hence it is quite important for such initiatives to be based upon community participation and engagement. While Kristina et al. (2006) were not able to control for all possible confounds, their findings point to numerous ways in which community involvement could crucially impact upon the success, appreciation, and sustainability of community-based initiatives.

Gallacher et al. (2007) investigated the learning cultures of two community learning centres. The centres were attached to two of Scotland’s Further Education colleges, and each offered community-based further education. Their research methodology was characterised by engagement with a member of the teaching staff from each college being included in the team of investigators. As such, the team no longer consisted wholly of ‘outsiders’, and was able to benefit from the perspectives of those who worked within further education environments. The two teaching staff members were fully included in the process of analysing and interpreting the data, and drawing conclusions from it.

In studying the learning culture of each centre, Gallacher et al. (2007) identified some of the features that made the centres successful in engaging community members – who were often underprivileged, suffering health problems, or in some other way disadvantaged – in further education. Specifically, it was found that the boundaries between the centres and the other dimensions of the learners’ lives were more ‘permeable’ than was the case with the main college campuses. In other words, the learners were not required to “leave the complexity of their lives at the door” (Gallacher et al., 2007, p. 506) when attending the community learning centres. Complementing this, the teaching staff at the centres were less formal in their approach to teaching and in their relationships with the learners. Thus, the learners felt comfortable in attending the centres, and were able to engage with their teachers on more or less an equal level, rather than as subordinates to authoritative lecturers (indeed, the teaching staff at the centres did not even refer to themselves as lecturers, but rather as tutors). Gallacher et al. (2007) described the relationships between the learners and tutors in terms of ‘horizontality’, in order to capture the non-hierarchical structure of the relationships amongst the staff and learners at the centres. Horizontality is a key feature of community engagement: community members are active participants, working with universities as collaborators, rather than being service recipients. The benefits of this feature were clear in Gallacher et al.’s (2007) study: the learners at each centre
were observed to develop increased self-confidence and to achieve “measurable success in learning outcomes” (p. 514).

Further evidence of the importance of engagement, over and above the effects of mere service provision, comes from Lafuente and Lane’s (1995) study of homelessness. The investigators interviewed 10 homeless men about their experiences of social disaffiliation. The interviewees described their lack of stable social ties and their resultant powerlessness. Their struggles with poverty and social isolation meant that they were unable to contribute to the community in mainstream ways, such as by voting or paying taxes. This disenfranchisement is part of the vicious cycle of homelessness and disengagement: the more disaffiliated a person becomes, the less they are able to contribute and connect to society, and so they become even more disengaged.

By examining society’s responses to this vicious cycle of disaffiliation, the distinction between community engagement and community service becomes even clearer. The homeless men interviewed for Lafuente and Lane’s (1995) study were highly withdrawn from society, and expressed no desire to develop or rebuild social ties. And yet, paradoxically, as they became increasingly disaffiliated, they became increasingly dependent on others for assistance in meeting their basic needs. In this way, greater disengagement from others led to a greater reliance upon others. The implication is that the homeless men’s receipt of services was not sufficient to allow them to exit the cycle of homelessness. Indeed, their consumption of services correlated with increases in disaffiliation. Clearly, they were not benefiting as passive service/welfare recipients, beyond having their basic needs met.

Genuine community engagement promotes the development of relationships founded on interdependence, rather than dependence. Within the framework of community engagement, the solution to disaffiliation and other forms of disadvantage is not a one-way relationship of service provision. Instead, the solution is to empower disadvantaged people by giving them opportunities to contribute as well as to receive. When provided with opportunities to contribute to and engage with society, disadvantaged people are able to feel more confident about their ability to reengage with mainstream society and achieve a greater level of social inclusion.

So, as we have seen, disaffiliation and social contributions are linked; as one increases the other decreases (Lafuente & Lane, 1995). Efforts to reduce disaffiliation that do not also promote greater social contributions are less likely to be successful, because as long as social contributions are low, disaffiliation will be, to some extent, entrenched. Community engagement establishes genuine, mutually beneficial relationships with disadvantaged people: community workers do not provide community service ‘to’ disadvantaged people; they are involved in community engagement ‘with’ them; investigators do not do research ‘on’ disadvantaged people; they do research ‘with’ them. Thus, disadvantaged people are active participants in the engagement process during not only program delivery, but also program evaluation, and their sense of powerlessness and dependency is thus more fully mitigated. They are not people to be pitied as alienated from society; they are to be respected and dignified as capable agents who make crucial contributions within an interdependent, collaborative relationship.

The mutually beneficial nature of community engagement was observed by Hocking and Lawrence (2000), who conducted an experiment in which nineteen university students each performed 15 hours of volunteer work at a local homeless shelter. Their work involved prosocial communication with the homeless people at the shelter, rather than merely providing material assistance or performing other such tasks. In a subsequent questionnaire, the shelter workers indicated a number of positive changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural intentions.
towards homeless people, which were not expressed by the control participants who did not work at the shelter. The shelter workers found their experience to be rewarding, and were more likely to express an intention to engage in relatively demanding activities to help homeless people in the future. This finding represents the flipside of community engagement: it is beneficial not only for the community, but for the workers who collaborate with community members. Indeed, this collaboration strengthens the workers’ motivation to engage with others in the community, which in turn enhances the sustainability of the community engagement movement.

Stewart and Bhagwanjee (1999) reported on a self-help group for people with spinal cord injuries, and how the empowerment of the group members was evaluated. The evaluation was carried out within a ‘participatory research’ framework, whereby the group members were involved at every stage of the evaluation process, and took responsibility for directing the research and acting on its outcomes. The participatory research framework was selected because it was highly congruous with the goal of empowering the group members to become more self-reliant, independent, and self-confident. Stewart and Bhagwanjee (1999) argued that the emphasis on and employment of an empowerment paradigm represented:

…a shift from traditional individualist top-down therapeutic approaches to participatory modes of intervention. Rehabilitation ‘services’, therefore, need to be regarded as a process in which people with disabilities are intimately involved, rather than a product to be dispensed (p. 339).

Thus, the evaluation described by Stewart and Bhagwanjee (1999) was directly in keeping with the aforementioned principles of authentic community engagement, whereby community members are involved and active throughout every phase of a given initiative, including the evaluation phase.

Stewart and Bhagwanjee (1999) discuss the significant transitions that took place within the spinal cord injury self-help group, as a result of the process of empowerment in which they participated (exemplified by the participatory research in which they were involved). The therapist who had initially led the group moved from the role of expert and leader to the role of ‘invited consultant’, and then was no longer needed at the group, because it eventually became fully self-reliant and self-governing. In other words, the group moved from being professionally-led to being independent and peer-led. The group members acquired a sense of ownership over both the group activities and the evaluation research, and as they became more empowered, they developed increased feelings of self-worth and independence, and a better sense of personal identity. They also demonstrated increased self-confidence, personal strength, and resourcefulness. The mutual benefits of community engagement, for both the community members and the researchers, were also evident in the outcomes of Stewart and Bhagwanjee’s (1999) study: the evaluation “served the needs of both parties and represented a pooling of their collective skills, experiences and perspectives” (p. 342). In all, the way in which the group activities were evaluated not only provided valuable data to the researchers, it also contributed to the group members’ process of empowerment, as they helped each other to cope with the difficulties of having a spinal cord injury. Participatory research of this kind is a key element of community engagement.

**Partnership in Practice: ACU in the Community**
In recent years, ACU National, along with its Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE), has implemented and evaluated a range of initiatives, in partnership with numerous communities and community organisations. Through surveys, structured interviews, and focus-group discussions, the impact and influence of these initiatives have been assessed, and they have been found to serve as clear and powerful examples of the importance and value of partnership in community engagement work.

Butcher, Howard, Dockett, and Perry (1999) reported on three education-related initiatives implemented in New South Wales, Australia, and how these projects were built upon genuine partnerships between universities and community agencies (see Butcher et al., 1999, for a detailed discussion of the research methodology employed). The first project, titled ‘Starting School’, was focused on the issues surrounding the ‘school readiness’ of children who are about to commence primary school. This project forged partnerships through the formation of an “interactive consortium” (Butcher et al., 1999, p. 5) in which major stakeholders concerned with early childhood and early childhood education (such as policy organisations and parent groups) were able to collaborate with one another and with university researchers. The consortium proved to be highly useful for the involved stakeholders, especially in the areas of developing data gathering instruments and discussing methodological issues. In less than two years (1997-99), the consortium expanded to include a further six organisations in addition to the founding members of the alliance. This was a testament to the benefits and fruitfulness of the collaboration, as perceived by all of the partner organisations and universities.

The second project, known as the Teaching and Learning Consortium (TLC), was a teacher education program for student teachers from ACU. The project brought together student teachers, classroom teachers, and academic staff to form a learning community in which each participant could learn from the others. Specifically, the consortium allowed the student teachers to reflect on their learnings, both in the classroom and at university, and receive mentoring from the classroom teachers. Of course, the benefits were mutual, as the classroom teachers were able to share in the latest knowledge being acquired by the student teachers at university. The academic staff also benefited from and contributed to the consortium: they shared their educational theories with the teachers, and in return were able to observe their theories being put into practice within actual schools. In 1997, the TLC encompassed nine primary and four secondary schools, and by 1999 it had expanded to include 38 primary and thirteen secondary schools.

The third project discussed by Butcher et al. (1999) was collaboration between ACU, the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (ERC), and the Australian telecommunications company Optus Communications (Optus). The three organisations worked together to plan and produce two educational TV series for Optus’s education channel, and to conduct joint research into the applications of information technology, particularly broadband internet technology, for the delivery of flexible learning opportunities to students. This was a significant collaboration, given that it brought together organisations from the university, business, and community sectors. After the agreed research, Optus facilitated the entrance of a new partner into the alliance: the School of Media and Communication at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). This allowed the partnership forged between ACU and ERC to continue, and they were able to collaborate with UWS on a subsequent TV-based initiative. At all stages of the collaboration, there was a focus on ensuring that the project would benefit all of the partners.
Butcher, Labone, and Howard (2001) evaluated ACU’s Community Outreach/Social Analysis & Action Program, whereby teacher education students were placed with social justice agencies and community organisations (such as Centacare and Amnesty International) in order to work with communities of disadvantaged people. The students recorded and evaluated their experiences within the program. It was found that the partnership between university and community was mutually beneficial. The students were able to reinforce the lessons learned from their university studies by putting the lessons into practice during their community engagement work, and the communities benefited from the students’ knowledge and assistance. Thus, both the students and the communities in which they worked were transformed by community engagement. Indeed, the students indicated that not only were they able to help make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged people, they also developed their own knowledge, interpersonal skills, self-concepts, self-efficacy, and knowledge of social justice issues. Howard et al. (2003) reported that in 2002, three hundred teacher education students, placed with over 140 agencies, each completed 80 hours of community work within the outreach program, totalling 24,000 hours of volunteer work. This fact points to the substantial impact that can be made when community engagement is carried out on the foundation of genuine, mutually beneficial partnerships.

In a project that focused on community volunteers, rather than disadvantaged people, ACU partnered with three community organisations – the NSW Rural Fire Service, The Benevolent Society, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society – to conduct a three year research project titled “V21 – Enhancing volunteering for the 21st century”. The goal of the project was to study the changing nature of volunteering behaviours, the volunteer base of the three community organisations, and the ways in which this base and its capacities could be maximised. Each of the organisations involved in the V21 project was committed to learning from the others, and each was able to develop and enhance its research capabilities throughout the joint initiative. The community volunteers and organisation members were surveyed using questionnaires, interviews, and focus-groups. Howard et al. (2005) reported that the community organisations involved in V21 were satisfied with the outcomes of the project and with the way in which it was implemented, and this satisfaction, along with the success of the project, was attributed to the interactions between stakeholders that were made possible by the partnership amongst them.

Conclusion
From the community engagement initiatives explored in this paper, it is clear that the principle of partnership is important on numerous levels. By forging partnerships between university and community, the dignity and perspectives of community members are acknowledged and respected, and the university is able to benefit from the valuable insights offered by the community. Furthermore, partnerships work; they enhance the impact, quality and sustainability of community initiatives. Evaluations or reviews become partnership based and are integral to the initiatives themselves. Community members become key participants in all phases of community projects, including reviews and research. When the viewpoints, contributions, and capacities of community members are fully integral to such reviews and research the projects are more likely to generate positive outcomes for all stakeholders.
References


