Socially engaged Scholarship – The role of CIPSET

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Introduction

In an article titled "***New pathways to sustainability: African universities in a globalizing world***" Swartz (2006) refers to a set of critical issues which African universities need to consider in the context of technocratic reform and the impact of globalisation, nationally and globally. His prescriptions for such sustainability point to a number of interventions and possibilities that include the idea of socially engaged scholarship. His approach agrees with that of a number of scholars who argue for new conceptions of universities as sites for advancing critical citizenship and substantive democracy (Badat, 2007; Motala, 2013; Freire, 1994; Baatjes, Spreen & Vally, 2012; Bailey & Freedman, 2011). Swartz suggests a conception of universities as institutions that are more firmly and deeply embedded within society and echoes Paulo Freire's judgment that "a university that is beyond and above the social and political system of the society where it exists is unfeasible…" Freire et al (1994).

Pointing to an alternative conception of universities, he argues *inter alia*, that universities need to respond to societal demands; effectively engage within their immediate habitat; and reconfigure their curricula, research, internal organisation and ways of processing "the intermediations of knowledge and the social". A fundamental and crucial idea that can be derived from his arguments is the need for universities to recognise that they are deeply implicated in crises that communities face and that it is imperative to acknowledge that "universities [do] not stand 'outside' of the social and, like any social institution, reflect the characteristics of their environment". Applying Swartz's argument to Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), I would argue, that NMMU requires thinking that views the university as an integral *part* of the local, social, political, cultural and economic life of the communities in which it is located. Socially engaged scholarship, from this perspective, should compel us to engage with important social problems and political issues and to communicate with a larger public, upholding public values, while engaging in scholarship that is available to the communities of the university. (Giroux, 2011).

CIPSET and Socially Engaged Scholarship

The Centre for Integrated Post-School Education and Training (CIPSET) is a Centre at NMMU that is currently implementing socially engaged scholarship through its work in the post-school sector – the Technical Vocational Education & Training Colleges, Community Colleges and civil society organisations involved in formal and non-formal education of youth and adults. The developing work of CIPSET attempts to inform policy and practice related to adult and community education (ACE), and forms the immediate context through which socially engaged scholarship is being developed as a demonstration of how the NMMU could be embedded through the work of such scholarship as the core of a transforming institution.

The core of the argument on which CIPSET's Community Education Programme (CEP) is based is the triple challenge of poverty, inequality and unemployment in our city; the unacceptably low levels of working-class participation in post-school education and the need for greater university involvement in community education and development. With the prospect of continuing high levels of unemployment and the

deepening social crises in poor communities around poor social, educational and welfare resources, there is an urgency to connect ACE more strongly to local needs and problems, and to the interests and talents of community members. ACE, we argue, should be more closely linked to community development and community action. Many youth and adults continue to suffer multiple disadvantages and a multitude of problems as a result of poverty, unemployment, poor health, hunger and inadequate shelter. Parents are also interested and concerned about their children's education, but their most pressing problems lie outside educational institutions, in the daily struggle of creating sustainable livelihoods and democratic community life characterised by often brave, resilient and resourceful ideas and practices in the face of the tremendous difficulties that result from an unjust socio-economic system. Alternative ACE programmes must be linked with community action that seeks to build a democratic society. In turn, community action to build a democratic society must inform community education and make ACE an essential component of community development and community events.

As a university-based socially engaged scholarship programme, the CEP aims to bring into existence adult and community education programmes that demonstrate what Community Colleges (CCs) could look like. In doing this work the programme recognizes the experience of people who are excluded from the formal labour market and makes explicit the global arrangement of power that shapes the relationship between education and training, the economy and society. It seeks to understand, from the perspective of poor and marginalised people, what kinds of knowledge and skills they consider worthwhile in building a more equal, just and sustainable society.

The purpose of this programme is also to inform the creation of CCs as sites for community education and training and community action through using a community participatory action research (CPAR) approach. The programme acts in support of emerging community-based education alternatives and aims to increase the space for such alternatives to take hold and become self-sustainable. Through building and sustaining mutually beneficial and truly collaborative partnerships with established community organisations, the project aims to establish a model for progressive adult and community education offered through CCs.

Approach to socially engaged scholarship

CIPSET uses participatory action research (PAR) as its approach to *doing* ACE. We believe that PAR is the most relevant theoretical and methodological approach for building adult and community education practices in South Africa. Like, Popular Education, it is not simply a *method*, but rather a *praxis* in favour of the struggles of oppressed and marginalised groups. There are a number of reasons why PAR is regarded as most appropriate and key to socially engaged scholarship (Fine & Weis, 2004; Cammarota & Fine, 2009). These include amongst others:

I.   It is research with an orientation – it is political -- it sides with the poor, marginalised and oppressed. It serves the interest of, and illuminates and acts on the injustices experienced by the oppressed – it is praxis that interrogates the conditions of oppression and surfaces leverage for resistance and change.

II. It integrates pedagogy, research and politics. It links collective problems and issues to broader sets of social, political and economic forces and enables people to understand them and seek ways to transform them. It is therefore concerned with research, education and knowledge production that serve human emancipation.

III. It presents a radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science, most critically on the question of where knowledge resides. PAR assumes that those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed or denied are the bearers of revealing knowledge and wisdom about the history, structure, consequences and fracture points in unjust social arrangements. PAR therefore embodies a democratic commitment to break the monopoly of those who hold knowledge and asks questions about for whom social research should be undertaken.

IV. It recognises that "the ability to do research on one's social surround should be considered a basic human right – the right to research; or the right to the tools through which any citizen can systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens."(Appadurai cited in Cammarota & Fine, 2009). The tools of research should therefore be shared because communities are bearers of knowledge and creators of social meaning.

V. It deliberately inverts who frames and who is framed as the problem; who constructs research questions, designs methods, interpretations and outputs. It propels into prominence the role of the oppressed as the potential architects of critical enquiry – the originators of knowledge for social change and collective and transformative praxis.

VI. It seeks to investigate and interrupt what Gramsci called the "**_passive revolution_**" and thus challenges the hegemonic narrative – questions, challenges and exposes systems of mis-education which imply that failure is predominantly the fault of the poor and marginalised. It takes up the challenge presented by Fanon that "a society that ossifies itself in determined form … is a closed society where it is not good to be alive, where the air is rotten, where ideas and people are corrupt".

VII. PAR challenges the neoliberal project that breeds inaction and fatalistic inevitability, or what is commonly referred to as TINA (There is no Alternative). It therefore has the power to inspire hope and possibility and the demonstration of alternative possibilities.

VIII. PAR intentionally and deliberately attacks the new language metaphors of in usages such as "at risk", "merit", "intelligence" as victim-blaming and ideological-speak that seeks to deflect attention away from practices of mis-education, , racism and the greed of capitalism.

PAR and Popular Education

PAR is intricately linked to popular education (also referred to as 'social purpose' education) which embodies a particular orientation towards education associated with adult and community education, social movements, political engagement and civil society. The main purpose of popular education groups or networks is to defend and speak out in favour of marginalised groups of people in society and/or to support popular struggles for greater democracy, equality and social justice. Socially engaged scholarship through PAR and popular education is therefore not about 'social responsibility' or charity, nor does it mimic corporate social investment (CSI) models which have become common practice amongst university based community engagement programmes. Popular education embraces social justice and is critical of community engagement that maintains and reproduces the status quo. CIPSET, for instance, aligns itself with those social interests, political formations and social movements which are progressive and committed to challenge inequality, exclusion and discrimination and are committed to the broader struggle for democracy and social justice.

Working in the Community

The CEP commenced in 2013 following careful conceptualisation which took into account the multitude of problems experienced by communities within which NMMU is located. CIPSET staff engaged in CEP, and members from the surrounding communities in Missionvale, constructed an approach to a community education and development model founded on a combination of PAR and Popular Education (CIPSET, 2013). Using a Freirian approach, the CEP designed a research process which is transparent, co-constructed, collectively negotiated based on the collective inputs and analyses of those involved in the CEP. The approach of the CEP is laid out in the Manifesto for Adult and Community Education (CIPSET, 2014). Its community mapping exercise, using transect walks by which to engage with communities, surfaced an understanding of a wide range of social issues in communities as well as their strategies in dealing with the realities faced by them.

Through this exercise, the CEP began to construct the framework for curricula which is rooted in, and reflective of, the daily and concrete experiences of people and communities. Through ongoing engagement and dialogue, the CEP is able to produce curricula that can be mediated using a variety of teaching methods and techniques, as well as in exploring a number of strategies to address community issues. Some of the activities and curricula of the CEP include community education events, a vast collection of community snapshots which form the basis for constructing non-formal education programmes, digital stories, popular theatre, and the establishment of reading clubs. All these activities are connected to deepening the understanding of the social realities of communities and the production of educational resources for community as agents of their social action.

The work of the CEP is in its infant stage and has begun to offer transformative possibilities at different levels. It has begun to (a) engage with communities in the analysis of the issues that are important to communities, (b) mobilise communities to engage in seeking responses to existing social problems; (c) recognises the talents and capabilities of communities in addressing these; (d) opens up parts of the university to be directly involved in addressing social issues; and (e) informs government policy and practice in building community education programmes using a community-based approach.

An invitation to socially engaged scholarship

Although the CEP is in its formative stage, it provides a platform for broadening and deepening socially engaged scholarship within NMMU. The surrounding communities within which NMMU is located are faced with an extraordinary set of socio-economic realities related to the triadic challenges of inequality, poverty and unemployment. The social needs related to poverty, health, education, housing, nutrition and environmental concerns require scholarship to support communities in developing holistic approaches to meeting these social needs within broader strategies for development. Badat (2008) highlights the urgency for socially engaged scholarship. He argues:

> There is no shortage of vital issues that should be investigated: the dynamics and character of South Africa's transition; the emerging economic and social structure; the changing dynamics of relations of race, class and gender and their implications for poverty, unemployment and other inequalities; the character of the emerging black bourgeoisie, its relations to business and the state and economic and political trajectories; and conceptions of 'development' and 'democracy'.

 The challenge of meeting a variety of social and other needs provides an opportunity for a multi-disciplinary socially engaged scholarship programme at NMMU which draws on the intellectual capabilities across faculties and centres of NMMU. I would argue that a carefully constructed and considered programme, which is based on cooperation and an ethic of social justice, could form the basis for praxis of social change. Its work could culminate in the development of alternative community education and development models that respond to the immediate and interrelated social needs of communities, whilst at the same time, challenging the underlying root causes of these problems. For instance, health, welfare and food nutrition cannot be maximised without taking into account the underlying economic and social factors that impede their delivery.

Daniel Schugurensky (cited in Baatjes et al, 2012) suggests that "it is time to bring back the interests and needs of the majority of the population to the research agenda". His suggestion invokes the notion that higher education should be concerned with critical and socially engaged scholarship and a vision of the university as a public sphere dedicated to social responsibility and emancipatory work that favours freedom, democracy and critical citizenship. Socially engaged scholarship offers academics the opportunity to connect their intellectual work to pressing social issues instead of a retreat into arcane discourses that offer them the safety of the professional recluse. When socially engaged scholarship is responsive to pressing social issues such as poverty, homelessness, inequality, starvation, crime and environmental degradation, the possibilities for a genuinely democratic and caring society are enhanced.

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