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ABSTRACT The literature on service learning in geography courses has established and substantiated the importance and usefulness of such projects for student learning. In this paper the assumption is questioned that similar sets of benefits accrue to ‘community’ participants, those involved who are located outside the university context. The research undertaken demonstrates that projects, and the research or ‘service’ that they produce, are embedded in more complicated sociopolitical terrain that reflects not only the relationship between university and community, but also the complex ways in which organizations link to ‘communities’ and residents with complex local identities and interests. Analysis of this topography demonstrates the context-specific structuring of partnerships, research processes and the consequent diverse ‘after-lives’ of any research products that are produced.

KEY WORDS: Urban geography, service learning, community benefits, South Africa

Introduction

Undergirding almost all conceptualizations of service learning are modernist, liberal, and radical individualistic notions of self, progress, knowledge, and power. This is the latent teleology that individuals are autonomous change agents—that such agents can affect positive and sustained transformations, that such transformations are promoted by the powerful for the less powerful, that this downward benevolence is consciously enacted, and that all individuals involved in such a transaction benefit from it. . . . [S]ervice learning practice and scholarship is predicated on the belief that both the process and outcomes of service learning are universally beneficent. (Butin, 2003, p. 1678)

The literature on service learning has substantiated the importance of service-learning projects for student learning. Yet much of this research assumes, as Butin indicates above, that similar sets of benefits accrue to ‘community’ participants, those involved who are...
located outside the university context. As service-learning projects are premised on building relationships with communities and crossing university–community boundaries, this assumption calls for scrutiny. In this paper I therefore examine the outcomes of service learning projects in urban geography classes through projects run with community organizations in economically impoverished neighbourhoods. The paper critically assesses not only ‘who is serving whom’ in the project process, but the nature of the ‘service’, and the ways in which it is used by community-based and non-governmental organization participants after the university-based project process has been completed.

To situate the after-effects of class-based service-learning projects requires an examination of the partnerships, places and contexts in which projects take place. I therefore analyse the different sets of resources that university and community-based participants draw from. Critically thinking about the ‘service’ in projects requires unpacking the uneven power that structures relationships between university and community. In this paper, I thus contrast academic and student researchers’ ‘expertise’, technical knowledge and resources with community participants’ local knowledge, transcription skills, legitimacy and purpose.

My research demonstrates that projects are embedded in a complicated sociopolitical terrain that reflects not only the relationship between university and community, but also the complex ways in which non-governmental organizations link to community organizations and community organizations to ‘communities’, a mix of residents with specific local identities and interests. The contexts in which projects take place and in which research products are launched are thus built around a number of asymmetrical unevenly empowered individuals, organizations and relationships. Analysis of this relational topography illustrates the context-specific structuring of partnerships, research processes and the consequent diverse ‘after-lives’ of research products. The paper thus explores the difficulties and limitations in concretely providing ‘service’ through university-based projects and the problematic assumptions of service in the broader service-learning literature. At the same time, however, I examine the range of small and intangible ‘benefits’ that are built through the engagement between students and project participants that contributes to at least improving university–community relationships and understanding.

I begin first with a review of the literature, arguing for the need to research rather than assume the ‘service’ in service-learning projects. I then describe and interpret the topographies of places and partners, in other words, the architecture of the relationships that underpinned the projects on which my urban geography classes have worked, in the first case with a non-governmental organization (NGO) and community participants and, in the second case, with a community-based organization (CBO), contrasting the process of establishing projects, particularly the ways in which partnerships were negotiated and the consequent forms of collaboration drawn on in the process. To assess the range of research ‘products’ produced for the NGO and the CBO, I consider which worked, for whom and why, counterposing these experiences with the projects that failed. The final section explores the intangible residuals built through the project experience and engagement. The paper concludes with an argument for a more critical assessment and conceptualization of service between universities and the complex and differentiated social, political and economic organizations and contexts with whom and within which we work. Although demonstrated here in the specificity of the South African case, these issues
From Assuming to Researching the ‘Service’ in Service Learning Projects

A resurgence in and commitment to bridging theory, research and teaching is evident in a broad-based critical literature on education (see, for instance, Liu, 1995; Howard, 1998; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2004) and in geography is evident in literature on: service learning and citizenship (Mohan, 1995; Dorsey, 2001), morality and teaching in geography (Smith, 1995), justice (Howitt, 2001), engaging and working with communities (Waddington, 2001), and on geographical ‘expeditions’ as teaching tools (Pawson & Teather, 2002; Elwood, 2004; also, see Mabin, 1984, for an earlier South African example).

Bunge’s reinvention of ‘Geographical Expeditions’ in the early 1970s (Katz, 1996) popularized the potential and the politics of teaching outside the university classroom, in his case taking white privileged students into predominantly African-American and impoverished inner-city Detroit. Pawson & Teather (2002) argue that reinventing ‘geographical expeditions’ for large classes of cultural geographers facilitates students’ engagement with learning and improves their abilities to interrogate fieldwork and literature. Waddington (2001) emphasizes the benefits of working with community groups in producing applied projects as a way of improving student learning and retention of skills, and the use of skills across the geography curriculum rather than just on a temporary short-term basis within a particular course.

In parallel, Smith argues, like Mohan (1995), that geography teaching in higher education has an opportunity to “reassert … a moral dimension in how people come to understand the world and play a part in its re-creation” (1995, p. 271). Although he does not examine how to do it, his emphasis is rather that “moral teaching matters, that more of it would be timely, and that geography could be a useful instrument for this purpose” (1995, p. 273). With similar sentiment but more practical analysis, Oberhauser (2002) asserts the usefulness of student involvement and participation in community organizations to better understand gender roles and the transformation or reinforcement of power relations in society. These authors offer insightful assessment of the rich potential found in teaching outside classroom contexts for improving student learning, more effectively connecting theory with experience, and enhancing the role that a geography education plays in building engaged and informed citizens.

If there is an interest in this literature in the types of ‘service’ that accrue to non-university participants, it is most often assumed, however, as a technical problem of, for instance, the difficulties of ensuring that reports are distributed to community participants (Waddington, 2001), or with the process of best-fitting students with internships and community partners (Oberhauser, 2002). A few authors in geography consider partnerships explicitly (Yapa, 2000; Dorsey, 2001). For instance, Dorsey (2001) discusses strategies for establishing ‘effective’ community–university partnerships. He emphasizes the importance of reciprocity in these relationships, stating:

The establishment of university–community partnerships not only benefits students in need of career-building experience, and community or public agencies willing to engage in assistance from universities to achieve their project objectives, but also
faculty seeking utility to their courses and fulfilment of community service requirements as part of their academic duties. (2001, p. 127)

Yet, his criteria for ‘effectiveness’ reflect his project needs, not community criteria for participating. His argument proceeds on the assumption that projects can be mutually beneficial, but without an empirical or conceptual analysis of how this ‘mutuality’ is constituted.

These shortcomings echo Butin’s broader assessment of the literature on service-learning:

[S]ervice learning has promoted much good will among those doing the actual service learning, but there is considerably less evidence that service learning has provided much benefit for the recipients. (2003, p.1678)

In parallel with his concerns, in the South African context Mitchell and Rautenbach highlight the need for research on university–community partnerships, particularly emphasizing that: “Partnerships as the contexts for service learning practice and research need to be problematized and not assumed as appropriate mechanisms for development” (Mitchell & Rautenbach, 2005, p. 111). This paper responds to these calls for empirical evidence and critical reflection to further explore in Butin’s words “the limited community impact of service learning” (Butin, 2003, p. 1674) and the complexities of partnerships and process in service learning contexts (Fourie, 2003; Mitchell & Rautenbach, 2005).

The Topographies of Places, Partners and Projects

The projects I assess in this paper were part of two classes taught between 2000 and 2005 on urban development—one called ‘Cities of the South’ at a second-year level (2000–2001, 2003), and another focused on ‘urban geography’ at a third-year level (2004–2005). In both cases, classroom debates and discussions have been combined with extensive project-based fieldwork in neighbourhood contexts in two townships, the first formerly classified ‘African’ (2000–2003), and the second, a former ‘coloured’1 area of state-built rental housing (2004–2005), both in Cape Town.

Rather than running laboratories and practical sessions on campus, I negotiated research projects in 2000–2003 with an NGO and in 2004–2005 with a community-based organization (hereafter ‘the Civic’) in the latter neighbourhood. Conceptual work is thus grounded in field-based research. These projects were designed to fill research needs identified by the NGO and the Civic that the student work contributed towards. In the process, students experimented with qualitative field-research skills and negotiated the ‘city’ and issues of urban development first hand. All projects included a ‘product’ that was produced for the NGO and the Civic for their own development work. Although the projects have proved excellent opportunities for students to learn about the challenges to development in the South African city, the complex relationship between apartheid and contemporary poverty, and the intricacies of qualitative methodologies, this paper critically assesses the NGO’s and the neighbourhood groups it works with, as well as the Civic’s, experience and benefits from these processes and partnerships.
By contrasting the two partnerships and the different sorts of projects and products produced, I construct and describe the topographies of the relationships, contexts and power dynamics that connected me, and thus my class and the project, to these different organizations. This analysis helps explain the ways in which the projects and their afterlives unfold differently. I begin with the initial projects with the NGO in 2000, 2001 and 2003 and then turn to examine what I argue are more successful practices in collaboration with the Civic in 2004 and 2005.

Working via an NGO Intermediary

The research collaboration with the NGO and its linked community organization aimed to work towards the NGO’s broader goal of reinvigorating neighbourhood-based development in impoverished areas of Cape Town. Class-based projects gathered information on public and vacant space, informal traders, and skills and work experiences. In all cases the gathering of information was intended to be rooted in a community participation process run by the NGO that built local skills and knowledge, especially for members of the NGO’s partner community organization. Ideally, the research products utilized academic resources so that student projects contributed towards tangible community-driven development goals. In practice, of course, the story is more complicated.

The collaboration began in 2000 with research on land uses at the neighbourhood scale. Divided into groups, students mapped vacant plots in which community organizations might consider developments, community assets or amenities such as formal and informal churches and halls, and homes in which economic activities took place. The end product was a wall-sized map (see Figure 3), which highlighted that while there were few vacant spaces, neighbourhood residents were immersed in a vast range of home-based businesses. Although a complementary analysis of neighbourhood-scale census data portrayed a community with high unemployment rates, low education levels, and with a large proportion of youth facing extremely limited opportunities, the map visually demonstrated that residents were constructing and negotiating their own livelihoods through developing home-based businesses. Although rudimentary in nature and quality, the map proved a powerful tool for community organizing.

The significance of home-based businesses illustrated on the map led to the second project in 2001: a systematic analysis of the informal sector active in the neighbourhood. In field sessions in August and September 2001, student groups gathered information on home-based enterprises, documenting the type, quantity and quality of goods sold and services offered, the relative success of each enterprise and the role of the enterprise in sustaining households. The research revealed that there were 119 home-based enterprises undertaking a vast array of activities, including small-scale vendors to large informal shops, bars, liquor outlets, vehicle repairs, sewing enterprises, day care centres, doctors, funeral services, hairdressers, a caterer, a photographer and video maker, engineers, electricians, and a wholesaler (Lewins, 2001).

The fieldwork helped students reflect critically on theoretical and applied literature concerning the informal sector. Projects highlighted the gendered nature of informal sector activities, illustrating, for example, a sharp distinction between survivalist businesses and growth-oriented enterprises (Rogerson, 1997) and the ways in which these reflected household dynamics and livelihood strategies. The linkages and co-dependence of formal and informal economies and their geographies that linked ‘informal’ enterprises
to ‘formal’ economic sectors in other parts of the city clearly constrained some families in their struggles to earn a living in Cape Town. Although ultimately it was not produced for distribution in the community, a directory of home-based businesses, a mini-‘yellow pages’, was intended as a product from the student data collection.

A third project was completed in October 2003 researching skills and work experiences. Community workers from the community organization linked to the partner NGO worked with UCT students to analyse the ways in which age and gender differentiated residents’ skills, work and aspirations. Focusing on specific groups such as older women, younger single mothers and young unemployed men, student teams used a range of qualitative research methodologies to analyze gender and age and their influence in shaping skills bases and work experiences. These materials were intended initially to be in survey form to contribute towards a database on existing skills and on employment aspirations. This goal was overly ambitious, so the project in process was scaled down to research projects that could be used at a later point by the NGO to design appropriate age- and gender-specific questions to run a broader survey.

Centrality of the NGO’s Role in Negotiating Projects and Delivering on Outcomes

I negotiated projects directly with the NGO director to meet my needs to teach fieldwork in an applied, real-life context and to address the NGO’s and neighbourhood needs for research. Three older women community activists were the key links into the neighbourhood. Relationships between the NGO director and these women were based on decades of collaboration and friendship. I ran the course projects with postgraduate assistants from my department and, in the first two years, students hired to translate from English to isiXhosa for each group. In 2003, as we better developed a method for running projects, community workers from the NGO’s partner organization were hired to translate and guide student groups. The key community coordinators in the project were the older activists who facilitated and gave the project legitimacy through informing community organizations such as the South African National Civic Organization, as well as the Community Policing Forum and, in the initial year, schools and police stations in the area. The process of informing the broader community was critical for explaining the purpose and for building support for the project and for ensuring student security in neighbourhood contexts with relatively high crime levels.

Our collaboration with the NGO facilitated the research in the area. Our class projects were embedded within the NGO’s work and interest in the area, a connection which made the projects possible. It ensured acceptance by community leaders and the commitment of a range of important local leaders. This relationship developed the focus for each student project, providing the context in which the issue was framed and the shape of the research products produced. It also facilitated bringing young community workers from the area into the projects. The NGO mediated our relationship with leaders and in 2003 with community organization members, who were part of each research team, with students. The NGO was central to the project work and the relationships negotiated to implement them (see Figure 1), directing the ways in which the research products and process were designed and the after-life of research products.
In contrast, in the second case the university–community relationship has been built directly with the leader of the Civic. In this instance, I had worked with activists in this neighbourhood through research on the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, most extensively through the Campaign’s Community Research Group. The Civic had participated in a Community Research Group project that encouraged and supported activists to do research to support their activism. Through the Community Research Group, eight community organizations chose research projects that focused on an issue central to the community organization’s activism in their neighbourhoods. In this process, the Civic participated in preparing a survey on backyard shacks to supplement its fight with the city over housing needs in its neighbourhood. With 1700 households in the area, the survey was time-consuming and labour intensive. Participation of students in the survey proved a strategic way to meet the organization’s need for hard data to supplement its activism and my need for an interesting, applied and real context in which to situate student fieldwork.

Teams of UCT students and activists worked together in 2004 and 2005 to complete the backyard survey. The survey has been used to map the location of houses with backyards and to document the number of people living in formal households and in the informal ones in back- and front-yards. The students’ academic work has focused on qualitative analysis of how families negotiate the realities of backyard living. The first student project with the Civic completed half the survey work on backyarders; the latter half was completed in a second project in 2005. The research materials have been used to produce a large map of homes with backyards structures, tables with names, addresses of backyarders, and a booklet on ‘Backyard life’, which focuses on narratives concerning the ways in which families manage backyard living. The Civic plans to use these materials in its activism on housing needs.
The Civic activists were chosen and coordinated by the Civic Chairperson. All meetings were at her house, which also serves as the centre for broader Civic activities, as well as, from a container in the yard, the Civic help office and, on Thursdays, the soup kitchen for the neighbourhood. Her credibility and ability to inspire commitment and enthusiasm in the community activists to work on the project was critical. Moreover, the Civic’s broader legitimacy in the neighbourhood has been the foundation on which the student research in the area functions. In a discussion on the Civic’s relationship with residents and its centrality to project success, two activists reflected on their roles:

**Activist one:** If the relationship wasn’t so good with the people out there, then the research wouldn’t have gone smooth because people ask: ‘Who are you?’ … or they say: ‘We don’t want to tell you anything, it’s not your business’, or so. But because of the relationship that we have with them, even if they don’t know you, if you go out there now and you knock on somebody’s door, you just have to say, ‘I’ve been sent here by [a civic leader]’, or ‘I’ve been sent here by the civic organization’, then they’ll accept you with open arms ….

**Activist two:** … the people [activists] teach the people [the residents] not to speak to anybody. Now when they come and knock on the door, they say ‘No, no, no, no, I don’t want to speak to you. Go, just go!’ (20 June 2005)

As in the first case, a legitimate purpose and a local link were critical to a welcoming and secure community context for the student work and for the smooth running of the research process. In this second case, however, the role of the civic and community activists was central (see Figure 2). Each person was either an activist in her/his own right in the Civic, Soup Kitchen, or in home-based care in the area; or, in the case of younger people drawn into the project, they were youth with an interest in community issues and links to activists, particularly mothers involved in the Civic. The relationship between the research process, findings and products developed in overlapping ways that connected directly with

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**Figure 2.** Topography of partnership with NGO
community participants’ everyday lives. Not only were they better able to inform and guide students, but their investment and interest in the topic was greater than in the projects located in the first case (personal communication, J. B., postgraduate assistant, 15 August 2005).

Who Drives the Process? Consequences of Different University–Community Links

Both contexts and all the projects have worked wonderfully for teaching. But, the partnerships and the architecture of the relationships that underpinned them have unfolded differently. In both, my relationship to the partner, our histories and the types of people brought together were important. In both cases, the development of trust shaped the nature of the relationships and the partnerships, and was a critical factor in the running of projects. Although interesting, these factors do not explain, however, what happened to research products after our research process was completed. The ‘service’ in these projects, I argue, was collaboratively designed but its usage and after-life was controlled directly by the partner organization.

In the first case, the partnership was built directly with the NGO, particularly with its director. All projects were negotiated via her and all expectations for delivery of those projects thereafter rested on the NGO she directed. Community participants were not directly involved in organizational or content decisions. Instead, logistical and substantive decisions were directed through me and the NGO.

At the time, this was a comfortable process. The Director’s relationship with the neighbourhood was long, durable and irreplaceable; the projects could not have happened without that linkage. The construction of the research process and, perhaps more importantly, the imagination and imperative to do something with the research products was not driven at the community level, however. The NGO partner came first, determining the place of research and then the products of a map, a directory and a survey for the planned database. Benefits for community participants and residents were largely relational and experiential, rather than concrete and material designed outcomes.

In contrast, in the second case, the partnership that underpins the project and on which the projects were built is directly with the Civic. In consequence the Civic, the project, the products and the neighbourhood context intertwine intimately. The logic, drive and responsibilities for projects are embedded in the Civic’s activism on housing and evictions in more direct ways. Likewise, the Civic has responsibility for and ownership of the product and the process.

Analytically, then, the ways in which a partner links to the ‘ground’ shapes the research and project context, and the concrete ways in which the ‘community’, in these cases impoverished residents, use the research products. In consequence, the nature of the relationships between the university, NGOs, Civic and residents shapes not only the ways in which the research product is defined, but its trajectory: where it goes to, who uses it, when and for whom it is deployed after the UCT-class-based field research production is finished. ‘Community’ partners are always embedded in specific contexts, defined by different sets of power, historical and contemporary dynamics, with histories, specificities, subjectivities and particular imaginaries. The university does not engage with a *tabula rasa*, but with differently organized, hierarchically specific, sets of leaders, personalities and organizations that facilitate but also sometimes constrain the trajectories of research processes, products and partnerships. In all cases, they shape the nature of the product,
The Shelf-lives of Negotiated Research Products

A variety of research products have been produced with an explicit intent that they be ‘useful’ for partner organizations; they are thus the ‘service’ in these ‘service-learning’ projects. Some, like the map from the first project, seem to have been successful; others, such as the directory and the pilot survey on skills and work, have failed in many senses; in the case of the directory, for example, it was never successfully produced for neighbourhood use. The following discussion begins the process of analysing what was and was not useful in these products for community participants, and why. My analysis continues the argument that the closer decisions are made to ‘community’ members and activists and the greater their participation and thus investment in the process, the more chance there is for ‘useful’, ‘service-providing’ projects to be completed.

The Map and Directory: Products from the First Case

Compiled from students’ area maps required in each project, the 1 m × 2 m map (see Figure 3) was used for 3 years in a variety of community meetings in the neighbourhood. Although simple in construction, it acted as an important visual tool to help residents and activists objectify and relate the area internally and externally to other parts of the city. It was used in the launch of the NGO’s work, particularly in the first meeting following a slide show of historical pictures of important events and local leaders in the area’s fight against the apartheid state, which led to the formal development of housing in the area as well as the legal right for residents to stay in the city in the 1980s. At the end of this emotional, celebratory and nostalgic meeting, the map was posted up on the wall. Community residents gathered round it, locating their homes and noting their streets and the types of businesses around the area (community meeting, winter 2001). A discussion about contemporary development needs then followed.

The map was a neighbourhood plot map on which we coloured in the data from student projects. Despite its simplicity, the map has kicked around meetings for far longer than expected. In discussing why, the Director of the NGO suggested that:

In areas [like this township neighbourhood], which are disconnected, there’s no sense of or ability to objectify one’s own space. A simple map of their own area allowed people to connect with their own place in a different kind of way… The older generation in particular has not been exposed to them. The map helped people to locate themselves, to ground themselves within their areas especially because most people’s lives are filled with chaos, with a lack of order. The map provided a way to order, to visualize that was very powerful. The map is still used [three years later]. It introduced maps as a concept, as a spatial representation, as a representation of your space, and of your space relative to the rest of the city and surrounding neighbourhoods. The map starts with people’s homes [the plots are marked so that people can locate their plots], captures your interest, helps you make visual connections with elsewhere. In a project, which is about making connections and
Figure 3. Neighbourhood map of vacant land, physical community assets and home-based businesses (majority of erf-specific activities below)
linking with resources, the map has proved an integral part of this process. (personal communication, J.C., 8 December 2003)

The map was important to the NGO’s process of launching activities in the neighbourhood, providing a simple visual tool of what existed. The lack of amenities also highlighted what had not been delivered despite the historic agreements that led to the development of the neighbourhood and the moving of some formerly ‘illegally’ and informally housed families into the area (personal communication, J.B., 15 August 2005). This historic process was one lens through which the NGO re-engaged with the area and mobilized for contemporary developments. To what degree the map was meaningfully representative to residents outside the NGO’s initiative is not ambiguous; they have not seen it and now in tattered form it sits in storage in central Cape Town.

In comparison, the directory of home-based businesses in New Crossroads, intended as a mini yellow pages produced from student reports, seemed to offer huge potential for ‘service’, for recognizing and facilitating informal business within New Crossroads. Although all the data were produced by students and formatted in a rudimentary phone-book style, the directory was not produced, despite repeated attempts to revive and renew the research and kick-start the production process.

There were practical reasons for it not reaching production, but primarily it got caught up in the NGO’s standards and requirements for a professional and, in consequence, an expensive product. In the process, it lost its community-based functionality, although the NGO has used it to identify caterers and participants in the neighbourhood for work on some of their projects (personal communication, J.C., 18 September 2005). Similarly, although the survey on skills, work experiences and aspirations for employment process was completed (personal communication, J.C., 18 September 2005), its timing reflected the NGO’s work and schedule. The student work was caught up in the organizational logic of the NGO, rather than more directly in community-based processes or needs.

Research projects thus contributed towards the NGO’s initiatives rather than directly to community-based needs. Although not in itself problematic, the control of the projects by the NGO shaped community participants’ perceptions of the process and projects. A community participant, for instance, reflected on her broader frustration with NGO-driven initiatives in the area.

For us this is a big problem, a big problem. We’re afraid. We feel like we must hide from some of the people because when they look at us, they look at us like we are busy with other things . . . . They ask: ‘look now it’s raining: what about our houses. You said that [the NGO] promised this is going to happen—our houses, you see. You take information about our houses and then you didn’t come back to us. You left us for a long while.’ And, it is true; we never come back and bring the report . . . . People will never trust us. It makes a big gap to the people not to trust you. Because what we did, it was good work that we did in ‘New Crossroads’. But all that work, the mistake that we made, is that we never came back to the people . . . . Maybe there were problems, that we need to come back, [to say] that we are still here [that there are problems and here are the reasons] . . . . They will never trust us, never. (CBO member, 17 August 2005)
A lack of delivery of visible products and feedback from the research from our projects and the NGO’s broader work in the neighbourhood has consequences for activists living and working in the area.

Civic Products in Process

The Civic’s story is not the redemptive way out of this conundrum; I am arguing overall that it is problematic in general to assume ‘service’ in university–community projects and that, in many ways, any ‘service’ that might accrue or be produced from class-based research products lies in the purview of institutions and organizations such as NGOs and CBOs like the Civic outside the university context. Collaboration in the civic context operates with a different dynamic, however. The student-research process and anything produced from it is part of a range of many initiatives undertaken by the Civic. It meets weekly and a wide range of actions have happened in the community through which the Civic has established its credibility and capacity, and generated trust among residents: dramatic events such as land invasions, interdicts by council, attempts by the police and the army to remove families settled on the ‘invaded’ land, and a successful victory in the High Court that legalized the informal settlement produced through the land invasion, for instance (see Oldfield & Stokke, 2006).

Any class-based or other research project is not only shaped but determined by the Civic, and thus fits into a regular and regularized process through which the Civic engages with residents. This context does not mean that Civic activities are not politicized, but Civic activists have worked in the area for long and sustained periods. Perhaps, most significantly, and in contrast with the first project context, they face the same challenges, threats and needs as the majority of residents. A very different identity, context and set of relationships between the Civic and residents frame our projects so that the context in which students work, and any forthcoming product must operate in, is smaller, carrying a lighter weight; its success does not rest on the value or significance in the research product or process alone.

Even in the best case scenario, however, any ‘service’ in the research products produced in my class contexts is limited to the ways in which non-university residents participate in and invest in the materials produced. In reality, most reports and maps end up in cupboards: in my office at UCT, in the NGO’s offices in Cape Town, and in the Civic’s leaders’ and activists’ cupboards in township neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, despite their limited material benefits, the projects and the process of collaboration produce intangibles that are residuals of the experience and the student–community worker–activist engagement.

Intangibles: The Residuals of Experience and Engagement

She [a resident] spoke to us about all the hardships that she has faced in her life . . . . Through the stories she told us, her strength shone. In her face I could see the lines that reflected her life. Leaving her house, I felt like screaming for joy. It was a strange feeling. She filled me with a sense of hope, not only for Valhalla Park residents, but also for me. Strange. (F.M., Student Journal Entry, 5 September 2005)
Although the nature of a research product by definition limits it to a map or a report, the experience and the opportunity for project participants to learn from each other is intangible and critical, evident in the student reflection above. In working together, physical products are important because they act as a focus through which the partnership is defined and the relationships built that underpin the research process and the learning on both sides. Students learn about the immense challenges that families living in poverty overcome daily, about the city and the inequalities which link us together, and about themselves and their positions and identities in the research process.?

Community participants play a central role in the vast majority of student learning filtered through and often directly shaped by the relationship students develop with their community partner. At the end of the project, reflecting on working with her community guide, a student commented:

Our greatest teacher was . . . [our community guide]. This is an amazing woman . . . . From the first day she made [the neighbourhood] feel safe. She explained and translated any interaction she had, and included us in every aspect of this journey. By the end of it all, I felt that ‘we’ had accomplished something. M., B. and I were a team . . . . One of the most important lessons that this project has taught me is that we really are not that different. (L.B., Journal Entry, 5 September 2005)

The research projects, and the products associated with them, represent social processes that build on the research experience for students, community workers/activists and me, bound up in the experience of working together. Projects present the opportunity for both groups to step outside each other’s immediate daily contexts, in essence to broaden each other’s comfort zones. As the community coordinator commented:

Ja, it was quite exciting for me to see them [the groups of students and activists] coming back and talking such a lot; because even my one daughter, [laughter] we were just laughing at her here when she talks English. Ooh yena! [laughter]. But then I stand there and I see there she comes with the ones [the students] she did work with and I just see her talking and talking and talking. And when they come here, the whole group, they wait for each other—that was so nice for me—when the one group comes, they don’t leave, they wait till everybody’s back and then all of them would say goodbye and then they’d leave. And it was like a funeral, the day when the research was done [laughter]. (Civic leader, 20 June 2005)

Projects offer opportunities to develop friendships that, however short term, cross class, race, place and institutional boundaries.

Community participants are valued themselves in the engagement with students and the research process. Community participants’ skills and knowledge are acknowledged, in particular, for instance, in that: they speak English well enough (personal communication, 20 June 2005), have extensive local knowledge, and have a range of skills such as translation to and from English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa or map reading that might previously have been unrecognized. Their abilities to engage residents are the central mechanisms through which students conduct primary research and produce the research reports. Community participants come to a final session on campus to listen and comment on student presentations. As well as an opportunity to share the research findings
collectively and for students to receive community input and assessment of their research findings, in this final session students formally acknowledge the community activists’ central role in the research and show the community activist with whom they have worked the UCT campus in order to share something of their daily lives as students.

Although small honoraria are paid to community participants, the projects do not produce economic benefits nor are they tools that facilitate access to resources or to state engagement directly. Projects do, however, galvanize in small ways some types of related community-based activities or a focus that might be new or more strategic, or more informed by household realities discovered in the survey and interviewing process (personal communication, G.S., 24 September 2005). For instance, a soup kitchen was started after the first year of surveying families in backyard shacks after activists were struck by how many families struggled to access food regularly. On the university side, the class-based research has led to additional class research projects and more formal work on housing-related issues by academics.

The products of the research process, rather than materially significant themselves, thus represent a range of processes that hold potential and value. These relational elements are important ‘products’ in themselves that grow from partnerships and from the processes of engagement in service-learning projects. These ‘intangibles’ are not, however, service, but sharing, learning from each other, and engaging in a short-term context. A critical assessment of research products thus highlights the subtle nature of outcomes, built into the relationships that develop in the research process and into university- and community-based participants’ imaginations and understandings of each other, the spaces and places that make up our city, and its potential for change.

Conclusion: Re-imagining ‘Service’

The thing is this, it may look as if the research is done and nothing happened from that research. For me it is just great that some people out there knows what’s going on here. Like the students now know what’s going on in our areas; the way we live. For me it’s great if other people know that doesn’t live here or that doesn’t have friends here to talk to tell ... in what state are some of our people living ... The students come here and experience what’s going on here, go home, do the research, that is one thing; but [they] go home ... and they go tell their families, wherever they come from: We’ve been in [this township neighbourhood] in Cape Town, and this is the way the people is living ... A person never know where our story can end up, and maybe that people can come to our rescue. So that was great for me. I’m not in a hurry. Sometime or the other, something will come out of the research—from there something will happen ... maybe in ten years’ time or twenty years’ time, but something will, at the end of the day, come. (Civic Leader, 20 June 2005)

The Civic leader is optimistic that in the long term ‘something will come’, that knowledge will effect change at some point. Thus, although we do not ourselves produce that change, she welcomes working with students in my classes, and with researchers and a range of other individuals and organizations outside her neighbourhood. In committing time, energy and resources to service learning, university participants also hope for change, for better, less distant relationships with communities. But in these processes we must take care. First, as I argue in this paper, ‘community’ is complex and differentiated, embodied
in relationships between individual leaders, organizations and institutions that operate and intervene in impoverished township contexts. In working with communities and the terrain in which they are situated the ‘university’ operates in politically and socially complex territory outside its control. To abandon a naive assumption that universities ‘service’ communities, we need to engage however from a foundation that recognizes and affirms the centrality of community skill, knowledge and experience in service-learning processes.

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Notes

1 The terms ‘African’ and ‘coloured’ are used to refer to apartheid-era racial classifications used in the designation of segregated neighbourhoods and for individual racial classification by the then South African government. Although not legal classifications today, they continue to be used to explain racial divisions in South African cities in the contemporary period.

2 For a fuller discussion of student learning in these projects see Oldfield (2006).

References


