



SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE (SII) **The SII's approach to Community Engagement and Scholarship**

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A number of universities in South African, and globally are beginning to engage more actively with local communities as part of their social responsiveness and engaged scholarship agenda. However, we believe that there is a great deal of work that still needs to be done – both in terms of how we think about engagement and scholarship; how they are positioned in relation to each other and their practical application across different fields of knowledge.

The disconnect that continues to exist in most universities between engagement and scholarship reinforces a separation between knowledge and practice. This delineation is problematic for at least three reasons:

1. Locating expertise within a single domain reinforces the perception that universities are the seat of power. This reproduces current hierarchies of knowledge, and assumes that knowledge generated within the university is valued above local forms of knowledge, and can therefore be externally applied to address particular problems within the broader society.
2. The implicit distinction between academic knowledge/scholarship on the one hand, and community-based knowledge on the other positions the “community” as singular, homogenous and separate - often reducible to historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups (Badat, 2013).
3. The notion of community as external to the context inhabited by the university reinforces the separation of social, cultural, historical and institutional knowledges and practices. Such constructions of separate knowledges and expertise highlights a normative problem-solving approach, often applied by universities in the ways in which they engage with communities – and in how they think about scholarship.

Broadening our understanding of knowledge as complex and multifaceted and acknowledging that knowledge exists beyond the borders of the university requires an awareness of patterns of exclusions and marginalisation which have historically been part of the colonial project. Universities need to acknowledge in their partnerships with schools and communities that teachers, principals, parents and learners are also co-constructors of knowledge, and should therefore be integrally involved in processes of knowledge generation.



The drawing together of theory and practice is critical in equalizing the individual and collective value of both. Just as theory informs practice, so practice informs theory. The bidirectional flow between engagement and scholarship – knowledge and practice – opens new dialogic spaces through which to critique normative notions, such as those highlighted above, and to explore new interconnections through which voices that have been historically marginalised are centered.

The idea that knowledge is co-constructed, situated within a particular context/s, and exists in multiple forms, suggests that processes of knowledge production should take place by bringing together diverse perspectives. Through communicative interaction between the university and community partners, multiple forms of scholarship can be generated. It is these processes of coming together that requires the conceptualisation of a new, more nuanced language of engagement.

We in the SII are committed to offering opportunities for communicative interaction and dialogue, through which participants are able to critique conventional practices by examining how new processes of community engagement might contribute to knowledge generation and application. We therefore hope to foster opportunities for participation and inclusion in co-generating knowledge – and in re-conceptualising a language that describes the work we do with more clarity.

As we move forward, we need to ask how community-school-university partnerships might play a joint role as ‘creative catalysts’ (Benson, Harkavy & Puckett 2007) for transformation and social justice. The *university-school-community* triad needs to be explored as a platform for universities to reposition themselves in relation to the communities they serve. Re-imagining the role of the university in terms of broader community engagement and social responsiveness has implications for how we think about scholarship, and how we engage with our partners. A move towards establishing clearer models of ‘research without boundaries’ (Wilson, 2018) acknowledges the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and informs processes of knowledge production.

The leveling out of expert knowledge requires ongoing processes of collaboration, interdisciplinarity, critical reflection and interaction so that “conceptual coherence and contextual coherence” come together in relevant ways. As Fataar (2018) points out, this is not an either/or proposition. Scholarship is constituted in a specific way depending on the interplay between concept and context. The multiple positions from which knowledge is generated therefore suggests that through these interactions, knowledges are co-produced relationally and contextually, and that through dialogical exchange,



producing knowledge as they work towards building empowerment, solidarity and relevant scholarship.

References:

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