



SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE (SII)

The SII's approach to Teaching and Learning in the context of university-community-school partnerships

Briefing Document 5

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Universities and schools exist in broader ecosystems or systems of joint activity – ‘activity systems’ (McMillan 2011) - that serve to put pressure on their practices; to shape their roles and commitments; and, in turn, provide much of the impetus for their existence, in ways that both enable and constrain. These activity systems, which are both internal and external to the institutions and involve engagement with many communities, consist of multiple actors, practices and tools - all with their own histories. In the context of university-community-school partnerships, these activity systems intersect in complex ways in multiple spaces, and as such, often exist in tension with each other.

The space where these systems intersect has been referred to as a ‘boundary zone’ (McMillan 2011), the space where actors and practices intersect in multiple challenging ways through participation in joint activities. Teaching and learning are examples of such activities. University, community and school educators can be viewed as boundary workers, a challenging role in which they need to understand multiple systems simultaneously and do a lot of ‘translation work’ across different spaces (ibid 2011). This includes understanding that teaching and learning takes place in many different spaces, where multiple ways of knowing and doing interact.

In the service learning field, much literature focuses on the formal learning that takes place in either universities or, in the case of partnerships with schools, in schools as well. It also draws historically on learning theories that focus on individualised experiences of learning. Given that the nature of partnership work is inherently social, this leaves a gap in the ways in which we can understand teaching and learning in partnership contexts. To fill this gap, anthropologist Jean Lave’s (1996) work on learning in apprenticeships, which makes visible a view of learning that is social, contextual and relational, is very useful.

From her immersive and longitudinal observations of different apprenticeship practices across a range of contexts, Lave argues that because ‘human being is a relational matter, generated in social living... in social formations’ (1996, 149) learning theories which put forward an understanding of learning as a ‘special universal mental process impoverish and misrecognize it’ (ibid, 149). The consequence of this she argues is that such theories ‘blame marginalized people for being marginal.... with notions of better and worse,



more and less learning, and with comparison of these things across groups-of-individuals' (ibid, 149). Lave therefore argues that it is 'imperative to explore ways of understanding learning that do not naturalise and underwrite divisions of social inequality in our society'. This in turn requires a reconsideration of learning as a '*social, collective, rather than individual, psychological phenomenon*' (pg. 149; emphasis added).

Popular education, one such approach to teaching and learning, which draws off the work of Paulo Freire (1970; 1973), is often used as an overarching term in adult education work aimed at social change; it is 'popular, in that it is rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people, overtly political and critical of the status quo committed to progressive social and political change' (Amsler et al, 2010, p.16). In addition, such practices are 'committed to and often located in communities, have a curriculum stemming from 'the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle'; share a collectively produced pedagogy; and seek to link education with social action (ibid p. 7). It is because of these connections to 'the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle' that we need to take seriously the potential of popular education in our work in university-community-school partnerships.

While popular education has been developed and used in spaces outside of the university, critical pedagogy has been developed in and for universities. In order to counter the very dominant neoliberal global paradigm in education, critical pedagogy seeks to 'challenge the dominant ways that education has been explicitly imagined, and to inject—sometimes against every grain of possibility—the value and legitimacy of alternatives' (ibid 7). Bringing these two approaches together creates a potentially useful framework for re-imagining teaching and learning practices university-community-school partnerships as together, they offer the possibility 'to create learning and teaching environments in formal and informal educational spaces that facilitate dialogue, reflexivity and connection to real life needs, that in turn [can] enable the creation of methodologies encouraging and realising more democratic practice's (ibid 2010, 12-13). This in turn, this opens up the possibility for valuing multiple ways of knowing as well as multiple possibilities of who or what constitutes *both* learning *and* teaching.

While much of the literature on teaching and learning in community engagement often only pays lip service to these more critical approaches (Mitchell 2008), Carpenter (2015), argues that the potential for critical reflexive and transformative learning is there. She tracks the history of community engaged learning and its intersections with popular education and argues that if practiced through the approach of popular education, community engaged learning 'is a disruption to the traditional way in which we think about teaching and learning in higher education and the purpose of experiential learning specifically. It is a disruption because it takes up, explicitly, the *politics of pedagogy*' (pg. 4; emphasis added).



Perhaps the challenge to us in this work is to heed Carpenter's argument and take up the '*politics of pedagogy*'.

References

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