

## THOUGHT PIECE

# Introducing Community Engagement through Hospitality

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### Abstract

The objective of this thought piece is to explore Nouwen's notion of hospitality as a means of introducing participatory research, in particular community-based participatory research, to academics who may be interested in community engagement, but have little or no experience in recent scholarly developments in the field. This includes knowledge democracy, social and epistemic injustice, and epistemic agency. The approach is not intended to replace well established orientation processes, but to engender interest in further orientation in participatory research.

### Introduction

It is widely held that there are three mandates or missions that constitute the *raison d'être* of universities, namely research, teaching and learning, and the public good. The third mandate has a variety of descriptions such as extension, community engagement, community service or simply engagement. The sequencing of the descriptions of these mandates are usually, and often intentionally ordinal, possibly because this component has historically been an afterthought in contemplations of the purpose of higher education (HE). In South Africa, the entrenchment of the third component began in earnest in response to the White Paper for Transformation of Higher Education (1997). The 1997 White Paper firmly inserted community service (the original description of the third component) as a mandate of higher education institutions (HEIs). Prior to 1994 and during the transition to democracy, the strong tradition of university academics and students working closely with civil society and grassroots structures continued (Vally, 2023). As universities lacked democratic accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the majority, few meaningful reciprocal engagements and partnerships between universities and communities occurred (Bunting, 1994, cited in Saidi 2023, p. 5). While community engagement emanated from some university students and academic activism as part of the liberation struggle, anomalously, most universities were disconnected from local communities. Community

engagement began establishing its roots firmly in South African universities, following the Conference on Community Engagement in Higher Education, organised by the Higher Education Quality Committee and the Joint Education Trust Education Services in 2006 (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slammat, 2008).

By 2010, community engagement became the term used in South Africa and other parts of the world to describe the third component or mission. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC, 2004, p. 19) in its foundation document of CE in South Africa, defined community engagement as initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the higher education institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to the community. The evolution of community engagement led to the creation of community university partnerships (CUPs), which over time became the instrument through which the objectives of the mandate would ordinarily be realised. These partnerships usually begin as relationships between representatives of communities and their higher education counterparts, and as these developed into partnerships, the terms and conditions of the CUPs often determined their success and longevity.

## Community-based participatory research

A number of community engagement activists have in recent times adopted community-based participatory research (CBPR) as their approach to the movement from relationship to partnership. Walker & Boni (2020) describe community-based participatory research as a co-learning process in which a mutual exchange of expertise between all partners occurs. The participatory approach to research advocates the treatment of all participants as effective knowledge creators, requiring that all sources of knowledge and knowledge types, are included throughout the research process – from inception to dissemination of findings.

The participatory approach enables participants to question power relationships in the creation of knowledge, as well as navigate the boundary between what is recognised as knowledge and what is not. Carstensen-Egwuom (2014) posits that participatory research is crucial in supporting continuous attention to and reflection upon the social practices of positioning (reflexivity) and that it enables critical awareness of hierarchies and power relations that are otherwise taken for granted. Due to its participatory, collaborative and contextually focused approach to knowledge creation, CBPR has the potential to promote the levelling of hierarchies and power dynamics because it taps into the worldviews, language and knowledge personified in the lived experiences and realities of communities participating in the research process (Maistry & Lortan, 2017; Hall & Tandon, 2020). Synergies between local, popular, practitioner knowledge and academic, theoretical and empiricist knowledge can be created and sustained through a commitment to underpin the work of the community university partnerships with the principles of knowledge democracy.

## Knowledge Democracy

Knowledge democracy means (among other things) recognizing civil society or community as sources of knowledge about complex issues (Israel, Schultz, Parker & Becker, 1998). Over the many years of their work together as the UNESCO Chair: Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, Hall and Tandon (2020) have crystallised five principles of knowledge democracy, three of which are pertinent for this piece namely: (1) recognition of a multiplicity of epistemologies and ways of knowing; (2) recognition that knowledge emerging from the daily lives of excluded persons is an essential tool for social movements and other transformational strategies; and (3) sharing research findings in a free and open manner, while protecting the ownership of knowledge held by communities. These principles of knowledge democracy are underpinned by two drivers considered to be core to this type of participatory research: social justice and epistemic justice.

## Social Justice and Epistemic Justice

Inherent features of a socially just society include the recognition of diversity, economic fairness, non-violent conflict resolution and participatory democracy (Warren, 1998). Socially just societies are characterised by people not being discriminated against, nor is their welfare and wellbeing inhibited or prejudiced based on gender, age, race, religion, beliefs, location, social class or socioeconomic circumstances (Centre for Economic and Social Justice, 2016). According to Restrepo (2014) epistemic justice is the assuring of the conditions that allow communities to create their own life experiences from their everyday knowledge. It entails inclusion, participation, and recognition that knowledge required to solve prevailing social/human problems also exists outside the university boundaries, specifically within local communities. Epistemic justice also includes the process of identifying epistemic injustices and defining the basis upon which to generate epistemic justice. If you are in a disadvantaged position to influence dialogue during deliberations in CUPs, for example, you are likely to experience epistemic injustice and decreased epistemic agency (Fricker, 2015). Recognising potential disadvantages before and during dialogue and creating conditions for enhancing epistemic agency during the deliberations may be the first step to promoting epistemic justice. In the process of creating and sustaining CUPs, however, social and epistemic injustices may be difficult to recognise.

Two forms of epistemic injustice are explained by Fricker (2007). In the first the speaker may be regarded by the hearer as incapable of contributing knowledge by reducing the level of credibility of the speaker due to prejudice against the speaker. The hearer may regard them as incompetent or stupid, or both. This is referred to as testimonial injustice. A typical example is that in HE scientific knowledge or knowledge that follows formal structure for its construction (Boni & Velasco 2020), is often considered of greater epistemic value and credibility than that of other knowledges such as community-based knowledge.

The second form of epistemic injustice is described by Fricker (2007) as hermeneutical injustice which is structural and becomes evident in attempts to make an experience intelligible to oneself or to someone else. For example, apartheid prevented citizens from making full sense of their oppression as black South Africans. In other words, for some the experience was not fully intelligible and hence they were disadvantaged in making sense of social experiences as black South Africans (Walker, 2020).

Lortan, Maistry and Grobbelaar (2023) argue that one of the core functions, if not the core function of community engagement, is the enabling of social and epistemic justice through providing a platform for community-based participatory research. They posit that by including elements of CBPR in an Academic Development programme for newly appointed academic staff, awareness of the complicity of the academe in social and epistemic injustice could be raised, while promoting epistemic justice and the adoption of knowledge democracy in the research that is undertaken through CUPs. Academics who participate in such CBPR academic development programmes will be afforded the opportunity to become acquainted with the scholarship of engagement. There are a number of approaches to unpacking CBPR for new academics who may not be capacitated or even attuned to participatory research, including short-term and long-term orientation (Lortan & Maistry, 2019). The use of the notion of hospitality as defined by Nouwen (1986), is explored as a formal introduction to CBPR.

## Nouwen's notion Hospitality

Nouwen's (1986) description of hospitality offers an approach to cultivating epistemically sound community university partnerships. Nouwen viewed hospitality as the creation of a free space into which the stranger can enter (by invitation) and become a friend instead of an enemy. In the context of community engagement, the free space would be a newly formed community university relationship whose formation affords the opportunity for the establishment of a partnership (Nouwen's friendship), while recognising that the opposite is possible (Nouwen's enmity). According to Nouwen, hospitality is not an attempt or effort to change people but to offer them this space where change can take place. The space itself enables change, through the exploration of commonalities. At the heart of the Nouwen notion of hospitality is the pursuit of commonality without abandoning differences. The guest need not be brought over to the host's side; the host is to afford the freedom to the guest not to be disturbed by any dividing lines – real or apparent. Nouwen's hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adore the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to express his own. When the lifestyle of the host is inconsequential to the quality of the hospitality, in the space in which the hospitality is unfurling, the opportunity of self-expression of the guest's lifestyle is afforded the guest, as opposed to mimicking that of the host. As an extension of Nouwen's idea, it may be necessary to contemplate the potential for the roles of guest and host to be switched, without the conditions changing.

## Introducing Participatory Approaches through Nouwen's Hospitality

Elements of Nouwen's hospitality are a good metaphor for the promotion of epistemic agency, which could be enacted in a performance before academics (new or experienced) participating in an Academic Development Induction programme usually run over a semester. Many of the participants may not have encountered the notion of epistemic harm or injustice. A short two-part sketch involving a host and a guest in which the former enacts Nouwen's version of hospitality could be staged to depict epistemic injustice.

### The sketch

In the first part of the sketch, the intended outcome in Nouwen's hospitality is not achieved – the guest is made to feel uncomfortable in the created space, either verbally (language content, tone or both) or non-verbally (body language or actions). The verbal and non-verbal communication combines to restrict the self-expression of the guest, diminishing free participation in the activity contrived for the purposes of the sketch. For example, the guest may be invited to sit in a particular place prior to dinner and may be assigned a place at the dining table and may be informed of the cutlery to use during dinner. Over dinner, the differences in lifestyle between the two are subtly referenced in conversation. Further conversation is limited, and the guest does not stay in the free space for long.

In the second part of the sketch the activities are repeated, with the intended outcome in Nouwen's hospitality achieved – the guest is made to feel comfortable in the created space, both verbally (language content, tone or both) and non-verbally (body language or actions), encouraging the self-expression of the guest. For example, the guest may be informed of a few seating options (lounge, dining room or kitchen), or the guest may be given the option to choose whether to use cutlery or not during dinner (when eating a roti or bunny chow). The differences in lifestyles between the two are teased out in hilarity, without offense. The conversation continues for some time, and the guest stays in the free space, until eventually, almost unwillingly, the guest leaves the free space.

### The post-sketch discussion

After the enacting of the sketches described above, the audience should be invited to discuss the differences between the two approaches as a precursor to a discussion on power imbalances, epistemic harm and injustice, and epistemic agency. In the sketch the role of the host is to make the guest as comfortable as possible, to the point of feeling 'at home.' The role of the guest is to ensure that the host is not burdened while undertaking the role and discharging the duties of host. Politeness on the part of both is key to sustaining the hospitality. In CUPs, there are guests and hosts. Neither role is confined to one of the partners. In Nouwen's hospitality, the free space setting may be on a university campus

or within a community hall. The free space may be depicted by a telephone conversation or a series of exchanges via email between two representatives of the partnership. Each time the stranger enters the free space, an opportunity for friendship or enmity is afforded the relationship. The more often that friendship is chosen over enmity as an outcome, the longer the partnership that develops will be sustained. Sustaining the friendship requires both parties to commit to 'politeness' during the unfurling of the free space. In the discussions the notion of epistemic 'politeness' could be co-constructed. After the enacting of the sketches, discussions could be encouraged among academics about how tacit power imbalances may lead to diminished epistemic agency. The discussion would need to foreground that community partner perspectives are no less valuable or meaningful than academic perspectives in community university deliberations, in the same way that discrepancies in the use of cutlery during dinner do not lead to discrepancies in the taste of the meal. If the sketches are enacted with community representatives also participating as actors, the ensuing discussions may provide opportunities for these actors to share their experiences of being on the receiving end of epistemic harm or epistemic 'impoliteness'. The sketches may also depict what happens when inhibition meets confident exuberance and may demonstrate that neither is an indication of epistemic prowess. In CUPs both may be encountered initially and in the language of Nouwen, it is possible for inhibition not to adore the lifestyle of confident exuberance but take advantage of the space to express itself freely. In other words, an approach could be adopted to mitigate both inhibition and confident exuberance over the course of the CUP, without diminishing the value of either.

## Conclusion

The description of the enactment of Nouwen's hospitality cannot replace the rigour of participatory orientation. The latter is a long-term commitment to inclusive, representative engagement between partners who have already determined to work with each other, while working against social and epistemic injustices that may rear their ugly heads during the process of engagement. What Nouwen's hospitality affords, is the opportunity to share the notions underpinning a participatory approach to community engagement with a captive audience, in a manner that engenders serious deliberation about ways of knowing, ways of harming and ways of addressing and redressing the harm, afforded through the scholarship of engagement.

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## Notes on Contributor

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