



Editorial: Towards relational ways of learning, knowing, and being in African universities

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Campuses and institutions – as if they were not spaces where people learn – live, fall in and out of love, grow, find and lose and redefine themselves, as social beings (Tumubweinee & Luescher, 2019, p. 6).

Community engagement redirects scholarship from an expert model of knowledge production to one of engaged scholarship, emphasising collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge with external partners, be it individuals, groups or communities. The question of who or what is ‘community’ continues to be an ongoing debate influenced by the context and history of individual higher education institutions. The Council for Higher Education (CHE) (2020) affirms that “the conceptual complexity of community engagement has been influenced by the histories, cultures, and community contexts of the different universities that have formulated them. In addition, the different terminologies belie the unexplored (mis)perceptions surrounding not only community engagement, but also how universities conceive of their role and responsibility in relation to both ‘community’ and ‘engagement’” (CHE, 2020, p. 3).

Higher education institutions, even those mired in tradition, are not static; they are dynamic, capable of changing and being changed through *being in community* with others. Community exists within a university, made up of the staff and students comprising the higher education system (Hall, 2010, pp. 16-17). This community can extend beyond geographical proximity as universities comprise larger knowledge communities. On the one hand, knowledge communities are not bound by immediate geographic bounds but are brought together by shared epistemological, political, and experiential conditions, transcending university walls and national borders (Anderson, 1983).

On the other hand, knowledge communities, though expansive, may be bounded. For example, many universities established in former British settler colonies historically formed part of a circulating imperial network (Pietsch, 2013). As universities in the metropole increasingly became connected to higher education institutions in settler colonies, the British epistemic community was unmoored from geographical grounding, and networks

between these institutions straddled the local and global. This is evident in the fact that some settler colony universities enjoyed greater status than the ‘red brick’ universities in Britain – often, the “personal ties that straddled oceans would frequently fail to cross the country or even the road” (Pietsch, 2013, p. 200). The boundaries of the British knowledge community thus became less about geography and more about a distinct racial and cultural community (ibid).

Universities in the twenty-first century are international spaces that respond to the world in various ways and although universities are role players in the international arena, they also exist in specific locales: “*if universities have neighbourhoods, then they cannot be ‘islands’*” (Watson, 2014, p. xxii). Universities are as local as they are international, dependent as much on their local communities as they are on global knowledge communities. Yet, when we think of universities ‘reaching out’ to local communities, the communities that come to mind remain those marginalised from ‘expert’ knowledge communities; these may be civic organisations, informal settlements, schools, or ‘the people’, often near but not part of higher education institutions (Hall, 2010). We tend to imagine a community ‘out there’ and separate from universities.

This dichotomy between university and community reflects the persistence of a historical enclosure of knowledge, which, through credentialed discourses of expertise, may nurture specific epistemic communities whilst simultaneously side-lining knowledge creators and constructors existing outside the academy (Bezerra et al., 2021). However, possibility may emerge in the twenty-first century as academics are no longer the only agents of knowledge communities in which reputational value is claimed, contested, and distributed. The boundaries of what counts as legitimate knowledge, and from where it can emerge, are not fixed but can change over time (Hall, 2010). Knowledge communities are therefore not static but can expand to include various other agents (Bezerra et al., 2021; Mamdani, 1993).

In pursuit of this expansion, we may learn from the historical experiences of African countries, as the relevance of local communities to universities is not necessarily a new idea on the African continent. Examples of this awareness can be found in postcolonial Tanzania’s connecting university education to the nation-building goal of *Ujamaa*, in Kwame Nkrumah’s claim that a “university must relate its activities to the needs of the society in which it exists” (Nkrumah in Ashby, 1964, p. 58), and in what may be termed ‘*liberatory community engagement*’ – collaborations between communities and some university students in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. While much of the literature on the scholarship of engagement appears to emerge from the Global North, manifestations of this idea have a long-standing history on the African continent.

Relational ways of being, learning, and knowing

These histories can inform our present and future ways of being, learning, and knowing within African universities. The historical experiences may guide us as we pursue a *knowledge democracy*, which seeks to affirm multiple epistemologies, knowledge created and represented in multiple forms, knowledge embedded in social movements, and the knowledge of those historically excluded from higher education (Hall & Tandon, 2017). The idea of knowledge democracy implies a society in which a diverse group of actors hold relevant knowledge(s) to address societal issues, and these are significant as we aim to use knowledge(s) to advance social justice and individual and societal transformation.

The pursuit of a knowledge democracy challenges a dominant Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. This paradigm depicts knowledge (as opposed to knowledges) production as discovery through the study of isolated parts of a system by seemingly independent researchers. Descartes' (1637) famous statement, "I think, therefore I am", shaped the dominance of scientific inquiry. It suggests a disembodied 'I' that can produce universal truths, detached from time and space (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 75). An ontological dualism thus emerges, separating the mind and body, as well as the individual, rational 'subject' and the 'object' of research (Grosfoguel, 2013; Quijano, 2007). This subject produces knowledge with a 'God-eye view' (Grosfoguel, 2013, pp. 75-76). Research becomes synonymous with observation, while the eye given primacy as research instrument, no longer is seen as part of a larger, embodied existence (Popkewitz, 1997). By contrast, the objects upon which this eye gazes become passive, fixed in time, and devoid of context. For Grosfoguel (2013, p. 76), this construction obscures that the eye does not only observe but also constructs: "our experiences are mediated through language, and we do not merely see but are socially disciplined in ordering, dividing, and conceptualising possibilities".

Many thinkers from the Global South offer alternative paradigms to affirm multiple forms of knowledge, and the relations between them. Lugones (2003) draws on the idea of pilgrimages, or movements that loosen oppressive institutional structures, to cultivate something new and perhaps more humane in the liminal spaces. She argues that this potential lies in "travelling between worlds, or epistemic pilgrimages that require witnessing faithfully and making space for multiple visions and forms of sense-making" (Lugones, 2003, p. 16). This idea of 'world'-travelling is not what is generally understood from the Western, leisurely sense of the word – as these movements typically do not necessarily entail movement between *epistemic* as well as physical worlds. Instead, genuine 'world'-travelling allows us to think about knowledge as dynamic and relational. Our grounds for knowledge and learning are not abstracted but socially situated, "saturated with history and social life" (Harding, 1993, p. 57). Knowledge therefore is not confined to formal institutions of academia and policy. Rather, there exists a plurality of knowledges found in various institutions and locations. Aligned with this idea is the acknowledgement that knowledge does not only exist as written literature, but may be expressed in stories, songs,

folklore, languages, and artefacts Chilisa (2012). Storytelling is an especially significant form of meaning making in various contexts around the world.

This idea of 'world'-travelling is not only an acknowledgement of relational forms of knowledge, but could also be an act of relational ways of loving and being, as we recognise and witness those who have historically been constructed as different to us. Lugones (1987, p. 8) argues that it is "world'-travelling and recognising the 'other' that enables us 'to *be* through *loving* each other". This recognition is about more than identifying with the 'other'; it is also about recognising the self, and specifically the self in the 'other's' world (Kelland et al., 2024). This idea manifests strongly in Lugones' (1987, p. 8) statement that "I am profoundly dependent on others without having to be their subordinate, their slave, their servant". The interdependence suggested in this statement highlights that our ways of being are predominantly relational.

This recognition has implications for our ethical commitments as we create and share knowledge. 'World'-travelling requires rejecting the boundaries built by ideological mechanisms that produce dichotomies between social groups, such as the opposition between universities and those beyond their walls. It requires a relational ethical framework calling on us to see the 'self' as a reflection of the researched 'other', disrupting the ideological dichotomy between these groups. Ultimately, the 'subject' is not that different from the 'objects', or those from whom data is gathered. This perspective contests dominant forms of meaning-making separating the subject from object of study (Rendon, 2008).

Recognition of this relationship between researcher and the individuals/communities with whom she generates knowledge, could be one step towards transforming these dichotomous structures. Researchers do not construct knowledge in isolation but in conjunction with research collaborators; our knowledge claims therefore "bear the fingerprints of the communities that produce them", as learning is generated through relationships with others (Harding, 1993, p. 57). In the end, it is communities and not primarily individuals responsible for knowledge production: ideas are socially constructed and legitimated as knowledge by connected societies (Chilisa, 2012). *Relational humility*, or the recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge and the epistemic agency of others from whom one can learn, becomes critical in engaged research (Dalmiya, 2007).

As we move towards relational ways of being, learning and knowing, community engagement may hold unique offerings. Community engagement may demonstrate commitment to the importance and complexity of the 'local' (i.e., place), anchoring university institutions in their context (Almjeld, 2021). By focusing on the knowledge of surrounding communities, community engagement indicates the value of relational ways of understanding and meaning through context. Community engagement also requires the sharing of physical and epistemological space in reciprocal ways and, when these values underpin our knowledge generation processes, they could bring us closer towards a knowledge democracy.

Overview of the contributions in this issue

The idea of relational ways of being, learning, and knowing in the African continent, and broader Global South, finds resonance in the manuscripts included in this issue. They were selected from presentations made at the 2024 International Community Engagement Conference, held at Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa, centred on the theme of *'Community Engagement and the Trajectory of Community-University-Society Relationships: Past, Present and Future Possibilities'*. The AJHECE is also planning another issue drawing from this conference for publication in May 2025.

Kirsten Kingwill, Andrew Todd, Jonathan Davy and Siphosethu Pama open this issue by offering a reflection on a community-based participatory approach to understanding the challenges of patient record-keeping in a clinic in Makhanda, South Africa. The research project upon which this reflection is based is located within a Human Factors and Ergonomics (HKE) approach, which seeks to generate knowledge through study of the interaction of interdependent components of a system, rather than the observation of isolated aspects. Insights from both the primary university researcher and her community-based collaborator highlight the synergies of HFE systems methodology and community-based participatory approaches. Together, these reflections illustrate a relational process of learning and generating knowledge. This reflection could be especially relevant as guidance for other researchers, especially early-career academics, navigating the practicalities and complexity of collaborative knowledge generation processes.

In his paper, **Flip Schutte** brings attention to the challenges and perceptions surrounding community engagement in South Africa's private higher education institutions (PHEIs). This focus addresses a silence in the literature, namely the understanding and execution of community engagement within PHEIs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with stakeholders as well as desktop research, Schutte traces perceptions of community engagement within PHEIs and identifies key challenges such as lack of funding, unclear conceptual understanding, lack of time and capacity and difficulties related to distance learning models which raise further questions about the nature of relationships between 'local' communities and PHEIs for community engagement. Findings of this paper highlight that PHEIs, as institutions required to effect community engagement but without any of the government support that public universities receive, may experience community engagement differently. There is therefore need for more nuanced understanding and dialogue about what constitutes community engagement in these contexts. Schutte's findings on PHEIs may offer insights for policymakers at a timely moment, as the South African government considers how these institutions fit into the higher education landscape.

Darren Lortan's thought piece explores Nouwen's (1986) notion of hospitality as a heuristic device for introducing participatory research to academics with little experience in community engagement. According to Lortan, community-based participatory research (CBPR) involves communities as collaborators throughout the research process

and encourages critical questioning of the power relations embedded in knowledge generation processes. Thus, it could move us closer towards a knowledge democracy and promote epistemic justice. Although the enactment of Nouwen's (1986) hospitality cannot be considered a replacement for a more rigorous collaborative approach, it affords the opportunity to share the ideas underpinning participatory research with academics, opening dialogue about how we orientate knowledge creation processes towards social and epistemic justice.

In his theoretical paper, **Christopher Burman** calls on us to rethink dominant conceptualisations of community engagement. In so doing, he opens space for critical discussions about whether existing approaches are sufficient in addressing contemporary challenges. In his reimagining, Burman places emphasis on engaged transdisciplinary knowledge co-production as a challenge to mono-disciplinary scientific methods linked to the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. 'Critical epistemological selectivity' is proposed to bridge strong and weak transdisciplinarity, allowing researchers to choose methods based on the specific needs of the system with which they are engaging, rather than applying rigid or universal methodologies. Contrasting with some of the other pieces included in this issue, Burman questions whether the current focus on social justice as the main goal of community engagement is the best approach. Thus, this paper challenges us to examine our 'habits of the mind' and explore other guiding principles or 'spirits' of community engagement.

Jenita Chiba explores the connections between engaged research and intervention research design, the latter referring to a process involving collaboration between researchers, organisations and practitioners in distinct stages. In this exploration, Chiba draws from the concrete example of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention, a cash plus intervention for families receiving the child support grant in South Africa – a programme whose design and development followed the intervention research design process. In her reflection, Chiba argues that an engaged orientation towards research may enable stronger focus on community collaboration in intervention research. Intervention research, in turn, might offer engaged research approaches with a platform for rigorous fidelity, feasibility, and efficacy evaluations of programmes implemented in communities.

In his thought piece, **Matías Flores** reflects on two South-South exchanges in which he participated, at Universidad de la República in Uruguay and Rhodes University in South Africa. He argues that these dialogues offer an alternative to collaborations where Global North voices are most prominent, marginalising the insights and knowledges of those from the Global South. Flores' pilgrimage to both exchanges was perhaps as epistemic, embracing different knowledges, as it was physical; he reflects on the diversity and difference of perspectives embraced in these dialogues, as no universal experience or Southern model was assumed. This thought piece leaves the reader with five provocative questions and takeaways which offer direction to future South-South and global collaborations.

Finally, **Sisesakhe Ntlabezo** and **Ashley Westaway** provide an account of the 2024 Education Summit, a two-day reflection and learning process which brought together over 350 education stakeholders across the city of Makhanda in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The authors trace the decade-long journey that enabled this Summit, focusing on a range of educational interventions implemented through community-university and community-community partnerships. The convening of the Summit, and the journey preceding it, are assessed through the lenses of community engagement and social movement theory. From this vantage point, the authors argue that the Summit might constitute the beginning of an organic movement based on a shared commitment to improve the city's educational sector. This contribution highlights the significance of learning and growing together in pursuit of social change, emphasising collaborative characteristics such as reciprocity and partnership, sustained commitment to galvanising the agency of all those involved, and bold leadership.

Concluding remarks

The contributions in this issue resist universality, highlighting relational ways of knowing, learning, and being. Drawing from diverse perspectives and contexts, the authors highlight Southern knowledges and stretch the epistemic and physical boundaries of universities. Together, they underscore the importance of situated, dynamic, and reciprocal knowledge-making processes in addressing contemporary societal challenges. By building on these diverse perspectives, we are reminded that the pursuit of knowledge democracy requires humility, sustained commitment, and a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings and of local and global contexts. These relational paradigms, which resonate deeply with African histories and philosophies, may offer a foundation for more humane and responsive universities.

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