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Beyond Engagement: Universities within their Community

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Beyond Engagement: Universities within their Community

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Abstract

In the contemporary economic environment, universities both as sector and individually, are increasingly called to quantify their value. This is aggravated by the emergence of Massive Online Open Courses that promise all the content without either the costs incurred or the time commitment. While restructuring is necessary in many circumstances, this paper argues that the future of universities should be focused on the importance of building community engagement principles. In the contemporary world, universities and both the teaching and research scholars that reside within them can no longer afford to be isolated. Rather, what is required is the need to build closer, wider and deeper links with the various communities we serve. As such, any restructuring of the sector should be used to reassess the role universities play within broader society as well as promoting an active and engaged citizenry. As such, this paper is made up of three sections beginning with a discussion of the concept of community engagement. Following this, I move on to outline the pedagogical approach required and conclude by outlining how such an education is relevant within the emergence of a changing citizenry.

Keywords: university engagement, community engagement, active citizenship, innovative pedagogies

Más allá de la Vinculación: Universidades dentro de sus Comunidades

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Resumen

En el actual contexto económico, las universidades deben cada vez más cuantificar su valor. Este proceso está siendo agravado por la emergencia de Cursos Abiertos Online y Masivos que prometen ofrecer todo el contenido de un curso sin tantos costos ni limitaciones de tiempo. Mientras la reestructuración es necesaria en bastantes circunstancias, este artículo defiende que el futuro de las universidades debería enfocarse en la importancia de la colaboración universitaria con la comunidad local. A día de hoy ni las universidades ni sus profesoras ni investigadores pueden permitirse estar aisladas de su entorno social. Lo que necesitan es establecer contactos más intensos con las diversas comunidades en las que están establecidas. Cualquier reestructuración del sector de educación superior debería usarse para reevaluar el rol que las universidades juegan dentro de la sociedad, así como promover una ciudadanía activa y más involucrada con ellas. Este artículo contiene tres secciones empezando con una discusión del concepto de vinculación (“engagement”). Seguidamente, muestro el estilo pedagógico necesario para conseguir esa vinculación, y concluyo, manifestando la importancia de la educación dentro de la aceleración actual de los cambios de la noción de ciudadanía.

Palabras clave: vinculación de la universidad, vinculación de la comunidad, participación activa de la ciudadanía, pedagogías innovadoras

Universities across the world continue to feel the after effects of the Global Financial Crisis as they face budgetary cutbacks. The impacts for many parts of the university community have been devastating. For example, in the United Kingdom, it was reported that across the sector, there was a 12 percent funding reduction resulting in many universities being forced to cut courses and increase fees (Harrison, 2011)¹. At one of Australia’s most prestigious institutions, Melbourne University, it has been reported that plans to hire an additional 200 academics over a four-year period were abandoned because of cuts totalling more than \$1 billion across the sector (Hall & Preiss, 2012)². My own university, the University of Western Sydney, has not been immune to such cuts and has implemented a range of restructuring processes.

The challenges confronting universities are not unidirectional however. In addition to the tight budget environment, the sector is facing changes that are parallel to the traditional media industry including changing user patterns, delivery mechanisms and increased competition. This changing environment is epitomized by the introduction of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), which have resulted in the very future of universities being questioned (Cadwalladr, 2012). The exact size of MOOCs is difficult to assess, but as Laura Pappano (2012) outlined in the *New York Times* recently, the for-profit online provider, *Coursera*, reported that within 18 months their course had gone from nowhere to reaching 1.7 million users, “growing ‘faster than Facebook’”³.

The consequences of the rise of such providers is almost impossible to predict. Some feel that these threaten the traditional universities while others see only certain sections vulnerable, such as second-tier universities (Cadwalladr, 2012)⁴. Regardless, the introduction of this new dimension to tertiary education provision will have significant effects across the sector: some positive (such as prompting the sector to innovate), some negative (resulting in restructuring and job losses) and some which we will only know by hindsight (for example, the changing pedagogical environment).

Furthermore, such changes and challenges have led many to reflect on the exact role of universities. Unsurprisingly, the

'business-orientated' approach has been to demand that universities become more focused on meeting the needs of industry. In Australia, a report by Ernst and Young (2012) titled *University of the future: A thousand year old industry on the cusp of profound change*, called on universities to better specialise by not only targeting certain student groups, but also working more closely with industry or risk being left behind. The report discusses the need for "research partnerships and commercialization" and argues that universities must "deepen their commercial skills and capability" (2012) of staff and graduating students.

The focus of the Ernst and Young Report, which has very much set the tone for the future of universities in Australia, is on commercialisation, speed to market, partnering with private service providers. Yet it only makes passing reference to "community engagement" (2012). While I do not oppose the imperative for universities to build closer links to the private sector, singular, commercial focus at the expense of community engagement is deeply flawed, and will place universities in an even more vulnerable position. This vulnerability emerges from two sources: firstly, it risks placing universities in a vulnerable position of producing graduates whose skills are focused on a specific point in time within a rapidly changing market; and even more importantly for the purposes of this paper, universities need to build closer strategic ties to the various communities we serve – with the for-profit private sector being only one of many.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to focus on the future of universities by discussing the importance of building community engagement principles. In the contemporary world, universities and the teaching and research scholars that reside within them, can no more afford to be isolated. Rather, what is required is the need to build closer, wider and deeper links with the various communities we serve. Restructuring of the university sector should be used to reassess the role that these important institutions play with a fundamental dimension of their mission being community engagement.

Such a strategic redirection will have many benefits: from the pedagogical to the re-positioning of universities at the center of debates about the type of societies we want to build, to the quality and relevance

of the research produced and the culture of citizenship which is established. The very essence of engagement should be built into the pedagogical approaches adapted with the broader goal being to promote an active and engaged citizenry, underscored by strong community links.

This paper is made up of three sections. To begin with, I discuss the concept of community engagement. Following this, I move on to outline the pedagogical approach required and how such an education is relevant within the emergence of a heterogeneous citizenry. Before continuing, however, it is important to establish the methodological framework that I will follow. In my research, teaching, and engagement activities, I am motivated by a desire for justice. It is from this position that the methodological approach developed has been employed. In designing and implementing teaching strategies, research projects and engagement activities, I utilise a participative research methodology, becoming directly involved as both a participant and observer (see for example, [Arvanitakis & Boydell, 2012](#)). Here I am inspired and informed by both feminist researchers such as [Maria Mies \(1991\)](#) and post-colonial authors including [Edward Said \(1979\)](#) and [Ashis Nandy \(1983\)](#). In this context, both the ‘researcher’ and the ‘teacher’ – who may or may not be the same person – actively participate and agitate rather than simply observing and reporting ([Arvanitakis & Hodge, 2012](#)).

This is an approach that rejects the claims of one objective form of inquiry or knowledge that shape much academic research ([Stanfield, 1998](#)). As I have argued elsewhere, a number of important benefits from this approach come: it creates a pluralism that is reflective of both a plurality of knowledge and the heterogeneous nature of the contemporary world. It also continually “reminds us that in seeking to change others, we are not above the need to change” ([Arvanitakis & Hodge, 2012](#)).

Engagement

In a recent article I co-authored, Professor Bob Hodge and I trace the etymology of the word ‘engagement’ (see [Arvanitakis & Hodge, 2012](#)).

Key here is the central aspect of the older meaning and practice of 'engagement', which is the *gage*: this was the pledge made between two participants in front of witnesses. The *gage* essentially made an indeterminate outcome more certain by commitment of the pledge-giver to fulfilling it (unless something happened to the pledge-giver to make the commitment impossible). Any pledge, however, is contextualized within the specific conditions, commitments and potential benefits – monetary and otherwise.

Importantly for the purposes of this paper, and the concept of engagement more broadly, is that the possibility of making a pledge and seeing it through is dependent on the strength of the social relations surrounding the participants as well as the witnesses. It is possible to draw parallels with the research revolving around gift economies (Mauss, 1990; Gudeman, 2001). Fundamental here is that with a pledge, as well as the act of receiving and accepting a gift, there is a sense of reciprocity: to respond to the gift or, at the very least, meet the commitments made. For those of us working with universities and often confronted with the demands of producing 'outputs' from our research projects, the relationship between the university and the community is a precarious one. Despite our desires for good research, career ambitions and deadlines, we must acknowledge that different sections of the community do not want to engage with us, or do so only in certain ways. As I have found in my own experience, community members may feel that the research process is a one-way commitment: for example, it has been rightfully pointed out that I may get my article and research grant, but they receive nothing in return.

This is not the essence of the aforementioned *gage* or the gift relationship that one aims to establish. As such, it is necessary to reflect on and negotiate the terms and expectations of the relationship, and how these can be strengthened. Without such an understanding, any relationship is fragile and prone to fracture.

From this perspective, the concept of a *gage*, 'pledge' and gift, potentially offer us ways of understanding the way the universities engage with communities. To begin with, the relationship must be understood as reciprocal with both parties experiencing agency. The university community – researchers, teachers and administrators –

as well as students and community members have agency and expectations when ‘engaging’. By acknowledging and encouraging this agency, we build an important sense of reciprocity. Agency and reciprocity come to rest on a complex network of commitments or ‘pledges’.

The second important insight is that such a commitment should be based on a sense of desire (Brent, 2004; Arvanitakis, 2009). Community development worker, Jeremy Brent, has argued that the basis of a community is a sense of desire: that is, each participant in the community must desire to remain involved. This conceptualization challenges the Hegelian conceptualization that communities are formed ‘naturally’ with those that we recognize (Fukuyama, 1992). Rather, Brent's position is that for communities to be formed and remain, there is a requirement for ongoing efforts to coexist and maintain this desire (Brent, 2004). In this way, communities can be formed beyond those we simply recognize as being ‘like us’ but also those with whom we establish a reciprocated sense of desire. On this view, the pledge will only be maintained if there is a desire to do so – and it is this desire that builds the complex bonds of a community.

The third insight is that the pledge, once established, should not be casually broken. If we continue to draw on gift theory, then we must see the bonds that are established through exchanges as the very foundations of an authentic community (Mauss, 1990). When pledges are broken, community bonds are fractured or even broken. Universities should not make promises of engagement with a sense of indifference, or there will be adverse long-term consequences when the commitments are not maintained.

While this background may provide insights into the concept and importance of ‘engagement’, it is also essential to understand what is meant by community engagement. University engagement is an ambiguous term with no broadly accepted definition and can mean everything from speaking at a local school about ‘university life’, taking part in public debates, and bridging the “gap between the laboratory discovery and practice” in the medical sciences (Doberneck, Glass & Schweitzer, 2010).

Despite this, a number of general themes emerge when investigating

the ‘engaged university’ (Watson et al., 2011). In their quest for a broad definition, Doberneck (et al., 2010) quote Michigan State University’s discussion of engagement as a “scholarly endeavour that cross-cuts teaching, research and service... generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences ... that are consistent with university and unit missions”. In my own research, I have reviewed the websites of each of the 41 universities in Australia and identified that each refers to ‘engagement’ in some way – with the most frequent being a reference to ‘mutual benefit’. My university, which is one of the case studies featured in the research of Watson (et al., 2011), describes ‘engagement’ in similar terms: as a “partnership, for mutual benefit, between the University and its communities, be they regional, national or global ... a distinctive way of carrying out research, teaching, learning and service”⁵.

Cynics may feel that this simply pays lip service in a time when neoliberalism has come to grip the university sector, yet only a generation ago, it was unlikely that university management would have mentioned the term ‘engagement’. For those of us who pursue an ‘engagement’ agenda in our research and teaching activities, these descriptions do not necessarily establish a clear direction. For example, how do we define and judge ‘mutual benefit’? Further, how do we manage the incompatibilities of engagement; such as when our engagement pursuit brings different communities into conflict?

Such definitions fail to acknowledge the significant power imbalances between institutions such as universities and the communities we ‘engage’. Centuries of cultural development have placed universities as the source of knowledge with a one-way relationship with the community. In this relationship, the central figure is the university who benefits others by producing knowledge that it believes they need. Yet those others who never seem to “be involved in deciding what benefits they most want, and in what form” (Arvanitakis & Hodge, 2012).

This leads us back to the question that began this section: what do we mean by engagement? Only a contextualised response can suffice. One principle which should guide the development of ‘engagement practices’ is that the mutual benefit should describe a

two-way process in both knowledge production and the development of the *civus*. That is, engagement should be about making a pledge towards strategic involvement and intervention not only through our teaching and research, but also by working with the broader citizenry to promote a sense of agency and active citizenship.

It is at this nexus that engagement provides the most important potential into the future of universities: that is, the university community more generally should see our role as not just about promoting education but working with citizens to identify and promote what is important to them. This should be the pledge (or gift) we offer to the community. To make such a pledge requires us to challenge and break down (at least some) knowledge hierarchies. This does not mean that all knowledge should be considered equal – as the debates about the causes of climate change have shown us – for it is not. Rather, this is a position that argues it is the community that should guide us, not simply scholars setting the priorities based on our own beliefs.

Such a position has important pedagogical implications and directions; and it is here that I turn to next.

Pedagogical Approach

The unifying pedagogical principles that ought to drive the project of the ‘engaged university’, I argue, should draw on the ideas of Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire (1972). While illiterate peasants from 1940s Brazil may seem a long way from many of the communities we deal with marginalized, privileged or otherwise – Freire’s ideas have repeatedly proven powerful agents of change for many different places and times (Thomas, 2005).

Freire worked on literacy programs that had a double intention: instilling practical skills while simultaneously raising levels of understanding and knowledge. For Freire, these aims are complementary rather competing: that is, one does not have to be the focus at the expense of another. Freire criticized the idea of ‘deficit’ as applied to uneducated peasants seeing it as a static model that saw students as passive containers to be filled by teachers who monopolized knowledge. Rather than simply ‘filling’ them with a standard curriculum, Freire wanted to empower his students with both the skills

and strategies to pursue what they wanted and needed to know. What is fundamental in Freire's efforts to raise consciousness is that skills on their own are not enough. Freire's starting point was to establish the "thematic universe" (1972) of his students by establishing a view of the world, as they specifically understood it. The next step was to take the students through journey that passed through concentric circles, from the particular to the general, and from the local to the global.

Freire draws on Martin Heidegger's (1927) phenomenological concept of the 'threshold' – a second important theorist that can guide us on our engagement journey. When discussing 'threshold, Heidegger is describing those moments of change – when we move from a state of ignorance to one of reflection, moving from mere existence to seeing the world for the first time. It is as if we return to an adolescent state and are experiencing something that we have never seen; perhaps something foreign and as a consequent it makes us stop and reconsider our lives. This is not simply a sense of wonder, but compels us to ask 'why?'

This sense of wonder that emerges allows us to see and feel everything in a different way. At its best, we see a world full of possibilities – where change can happen – where we no longer feel alone or isolated, but part of a broader humanity. It creates a sense of hope: but this is not a hope that is passive – where you just sit and wait for things to get better – but an active hope (Hage, 2003). This is a hope that inspires us to act and respond.

For Heidegger, it is the artist who opens the doorway into this other world and guides us through the threshold: the poet, playwright, musician, sculptor or painter. At our best, it is we as researchers, teachers and scholars when connecting with the community as well as our students (who may or may not be the same people).

What we can learn from these authors is that they raise important issues around engagement and transformation. This is relevant for our 'engagement' because the aim of our interactions with the community should be about deep change, and by deep change I mean personal and political. That is, including the student body and community working to enhance skills within the university and when engaging the community is only one step. We should be looking at wider cultural change focussed on active citizenship, agency and the *civus* more broadly.

Drawing on Freire and Heidegger, our interactions with the community should be from the position that they are already engaged and reflective social beings, introducing the sociological and cultural tools to decipher both the world and power structures around them, encouraging a sense of agency and potential to create change. This has the effect of both teaching skills and affecting emotional desires to confront issues important to them. It is these desires that can be described as creating a ‘threshold’ for change. Key here is not to see those we engage with as being in deficit (or ‘citizens in waiting’): but rather acknowledging that there exist complex networks and interactions that allow communities to exist.

Within the university, this can give rise to engaged learning where students have the opportunity to apply the theoretical curriculum to their personal, professional and academic journeys. Using specifically designed exercises, the students map their interactions and to reveal how they both influence, and are influenced by, power relationships. The outcome, then, is to produce not just knowledgeable and skilled students, but active citizens who will want to contribute to the *civus* – and it is this concept I turn to next.

The Heterogeneous Citizen

As discussed above, a broader aim and outcome of university engagement is the promotion of active citizenship, agency and the *civus*. I would argue that a full understanding of the complex and heterogeneous nature of contemporary citizenship is fundamental to the success of such an endeavor. Traditionally, citizenship has been presented as a set of social and political practices (Turner, 1993) directed by law that bind us to a nation (Mueller, 2002). Critically, citizenship tends to describe what people are included in as well as excluded from (Turner, 2009). Drawing on T.H. Marshall’s (1950) discussion of ‘social citizenship’, we identify rights and responsibilities that “define the identity of members of a political community, thereby regulating access to the benefits and privileges of membership” (Turner, 2009). This presents us with a form of belonging and constructs a unifying sense of what we may consider ‘the civic’. The traditional

model implies vertical and linear relationships between civic institutions and citizens (Brodie 2004) that sometimes may be reciprocal but always are asymmetrical. The way the strength of these relationships are assessed is through broad quantitative measures such as polls, voter attitudes and participation (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994).

As discussed elsewhere, the concepts of citizenship hold simultaneous and contradictory aims (see Arvanitakis & Hodge, 2012). From above, citizenship is often a strategy of governance and a way to ensure the populace aligns with ruling sections of the state; while from below, it is seen as a mechanism of empowerment, agency and activism. The way this plays out varies and should not be assumed to be stable, pre-fixed or simple. Rather, as the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the Tea Party have shown us, the *civis* is a site for struggle that is constantly redefined.

Despite major contestations and a dramatically changing demographic, economic and political environment, concepts of citizenship have remained stagnant for decades. My focus here is Australia, where we have seen a number of simplifying assumptions deployed in an attempt to force a better fit between potential citizens and a single, homogenous ideal of citizenship. The proposed ‘civic education’ course that is to be introduced in Australia secondary schools, for example, repeats many of the standard approaches to understanding citizenship: treating young people as citizens in waiting and taking a one size fits all approach (ACARA, 2012). What we are presented with is the idealised citizen framed within a limited range of values and identities: conservative, mono-cultural, Anglo-Australian (Dyrenfurth, 2005), rational (Isin, 2004), one who is economically successful and above a certain age. Even by embracing ‘multiculturalism’, Kenan Malik (2012) argues that we are seeing a homogenising of complex communities because governments demand representatives of complex communities rather than acknowledging this diversity. In this way, civic institutions search for the representative and acceptable ‘Muslim voice’ or ‘youth representative’. Both are undoubtedly fictions. While Malik is discussing examples in the United Kingdom, similar observations can be made in the Australian environment.

In addition to this shifting environment, we are seeing the changing nature of governance. No longer is the vertical model of citizenship acceptable as we see the emergence of highly complex and changing governance relationships for all citizens to negotiate if they are to access their rights or fulfil their responsibilities. To have even minimal control over our lives, we must negotiate dealings with formal government structures plus interact with private service providers (schools and hospitals), national and international non-government organisations, supra-state bodies (the United Nations and International Monetary Fund), and trans-national corporations (rating agencies and corporations whose income, capital and influence dwarfs that of many states) (Hindess, 2002). In addition there are various non-formal organisations and networks (including environmental, human rights and religious) well beyond the “sociopolitical geography of nation-states” (Hayes et al., 2010). Even though this is a minimal sketch of the contemporary environment, it does highlight that treating people as homogenous citizens with parallel experience as being clearly counter-productive.

The new global environment emphasizes the changing relationship between individuals and the state: no longer is it a simple vertical one, but subject to a multitude of formal and informal relations. The nature of these relations enables our capacity for action with other (heterogeneous) citizens, in many 'horizontal' relationships that have emerged (Arvanitakis, 2011). Citizenship is now more than ever *relational*: subjected to a complex constellation of relations. This ‘relational’ approach to citizenship means that the bonds between civic actors is complicated by the various connections with other citizens and institutions (near and far). As a result, both local and global issues in the formal and informal political and civic sphere can influence the cultural practices of citizenship (Kuisma, 2008; Hayes et al., 2010; Malik, 2012).

It is within these complex networks of relationships that university engagement can have significant consequences and strategic interventions can be undertaken. If we look at our community engagement as a one off, research gathering process, however, then we may achieve publication outputs but any reciprocated relationship will quickly end. The gage discussed above, will be a pledge with

limited meaning and consequence: no matter how relevant the research, its influence will rapidly dissipate if it is a one-off article. Rather, the university and associated scholars must see themselves as embedded in this complex web of relationships.

This position is nothing new, as Bergmen (1993) argued when researching the victims of marital rape. Bergmen's position was that any interaction comes with a reciprocated responsibility that should be encased in a sense of justice. The pitfall, however, is to see the community as vessels needing assistance. This was not the point she was making. Rather, as Freire argues, these are active agents in challenging situations in which our goal should be to facilitate a threshold moment – to work with them to build a sense of hope that another world is possible.

If this is achieved, then our engagements are successful. This is what will ultimately justify the existence of the university community. If we see engagement as only a form of industry participation, then the scholars will be only one voice of many vying for attention. The engaged university has a unique position in the complex web of relations within the contemporary society – and its influence has never been more important, and its existence more relevant.

Conclusions

Some years ago, a friend of mine was researching and writing the way neoliberal discourse came to be embraced and reproduced by vulnerable communities. Her research, which is unpublished, reflected that even those that see themselves displaced through restrictive economic policies and practices embrace a neoliberal discourse of economic growth and the 'inevitability of progress' (see the work of Peck and Tickell (2002) and their discussion of 'neoliberalizing spaces'). This was an important project for her because it was her community that was being displaced by such developments. In a meeting with her supervisor, she informed me that he advised her to 'drop her project', criticising her emotional attachment to the issue and telling her she was 'in Foucault'.

This may be only one example, but it does capture the sense that scholarly pursuits should be detached (Stanfield, 1998). Furthermore,

it reflects the ‘empty vessel’ pedagogical approach that Paulo Freire rallied against. But within this example, we also find elements of the detached university – one that stands above or outside such challenges.

In this paper I have argued that in the changing and complex contemporary environment that sees the relevance of universities challenged, the way forward is to engage the various communities around us – the near and the far. To do this is not to produce research that ‘we may think’ is relevant’, but work with the community and continue our researching and teaching practices within the complex networks that exist. This process should be driven by a long-term pledge. While the functioning of these networks can be understood in terms of different relationships of *engagement*, we must consider where does the citizenry sit and what influence, if any, do they have? If we undertake our engagement properly, then this influence can expand along with the active citizenry and the bonds that bind us to these communities.

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Notes

¹<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12762556>

²<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/political-news/1b-cuts-tipped-to-hit-jobs-overseas-students-20121022-281jd.html>

³http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/education/edlife/massive-open-online-courses-are-multiplying-at-a-rapid-pace.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0

⁴<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/nov/11/online-free-learning-end-of-university>

⁵<http://www.uws.edu.au/community/engagement> - accessed September 2012.

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