

# **Engagement and social responsibility in the core curriculum: how engaged and responsible are our academics?**

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In South Africa academics have witnessed considerable change in the higher education landscape in the past 17 years (1994-2010). The changes include the proliferation of policies; the merging of institutions; institutional changes such as the introduction of strategic plans and quality assurance directorates and the proliferation of curriculum-based community engagement initiatives and directorates. These changes are important, but have not incorporated analysis of and discourse about the implications for academic staff and curriculum transform as a central concern of higher education transformation in South Africa.

This paper is based on the theory of educational change and sets out new pathways for Curricular Engagement with the emphasis on community engagement and social responsibility in the core curriculum (teaching and learning). In particular, three different segments in educational change processes are examined – the external, the internal and the personal. A socio-systemic approach is adopted in analysing the importance these three segments have for educational change in implementing an urgent priority. It is noted that the external forces of change (national policies and audit criteria) influencing Curricular Engagement are dominant but internal processes at higher education institutions (HEIs) and the personal belief, civic engagement and social responsibility of academics should become more dominant as part of their professional development. It is argued that, as well as external and internal segments, increasing attention will need to be paid to the personal missions and purposes which underpin academic staff members' commitment to change processes for curriculum reform such as integrating civic and community engagement, and social responsibility. Experiences and critical reflection of a professional development programme will be reported. Without a fully conceptualised notion of how the external, internal and personal will interlink, the existing educational change for engagement and social responsibility will remain underdeveloped and of progressively less use at HEIs in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Educational change; curricular reform; professional development

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## **Introduction**

Universities increasingly seek ways to be more relevant, to bring their knowledge base to bear on social and economic problems, and to offer society their leadership which is consistent with their core values of openness, integrity and inclusion. Politicians and educational critics seek evidence that public universities are able to elevate their research to inform their teaching missions and reinforce their historical commitment to helping to meet the needs of society.

Audits and accreditation criteria, national policies and commissions all collectively challenge higher education to refocus its scholarship agenda so that students are placed at the forefront; to elevate the status of teaching and to raise community engagement to a level well above the current level of public service, which emphasises a one-way transfer of university expertise to the public; and to strengthen the commitment between South African higher education and the public.

The aim of this paper is to examine and understand the inter-subjective meanings embedded in curriculum-related community engagement at HEIs as the overarching conceptual framework for curriculum change and reform. This paper is based on the theory of educational change and applied as an analytical lens (Fullan, 2001). A theory of educational change offers a picture of important destinations and guides you on what to look for on the journey to ensure you are on the right path. This paper sets out the pathway for curriculum reform, ranging from “community service”; “internships”; “practicals” or “charity work by students” as “add-ons” to a course in an academic programme towards the integration of community engagement and pedagogy of engagement in the core curriculum (a form of curriculum-related community engagement and engaged teaching and learning methodology). Pedagogy of engagement is conceptualised as a form of experiential education and as a collaborative teaching and learning strategy designed to promote students' academic enhancement, personal growth and social responsibility. Students render relevant and meaningful service in community and service agency settings which offer experiences related to the academic content. Through structured reflection, students examine their experiences critically and determine whether they have attained the learning outcomes; thus enhancing the quality of students' learning and their service, as well as fostering social responsibility (cf. Ash, Clayton & Atkinson, 2005). How academic staff should teach and facilitate curricular engagement and engaged pedagogy?

The theory of educational change is a practical and essential part of successful transformation. If we understand change, we can lead it better (Fullan, 2001). I am an internal change agent working within a research university to initiate and promote change, which is aimed at initiating and promoting change in curricular engagement, with the emphasis on the scholarship of engagement (integration of teaching; engagement; application and discovery).

## **Curricular Engagement: conceptual framework and rationale**

The concept of curriculum-related engagement has been central to my professional concerns as social worker, psychologist and higher education educator over two decades and also to my way of thinking about educational change since the early 1990s. My thinking and personal beliefs about educational change were inspired by my early experiences and dialogues with other colleagues as an academic staff member at a higher education research institution, together with my involvement in the integration of community engagement in the curriculum

and the interest I took in university cultures, university-community partnerships and educational theories for social development, social justice, engagement and change. But perhaps the real starting point was my conviction as a young academic that “community service”; “internships”; “practicals” or “charity work by students” as “add-ons” to a course should and could be vastly improved by a deep commitment to curriculum-related engagement at all levels (institution, faculty, department/discipline and programme), the need for the professional development of academic staff and the fostering of civic learning, civic engagement and social justice among academic staff and students. I bring these personal beliefs and missions to the change process (personal change) and it is integrated in my teaching philosophy of training academic staff members in a Service-Learning Capacity Building Programme (2005-2008), the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (2004-2008) and a University Priority training course for academic staff members in Curricular and Research-related Community Engagement (2008-2010) on the theory and practice of curricular engagement at a research university.

Curricular Engagement (CEng) refers to the curriculum, teaching, learning, research and scholarship which engage academic staff, students and community service agencies/organisations in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration. Their interactions address community-identified needs, deepen students’ civic and academic learning and enrich the scholarship of the university. CEng is an indicator of the cross-cutting model of Community Engagement (CE) and a benchmark for community engagement. Curricular Engagement (CEng) and non-Curricular Community Engagement are the main categories of community engagement at many universities in South Africa. The focus in these universities is on the integration of community engagement into the curricula of formal academic programmes. For this reason, these universities sometimes refer to this as community-engaged teaching and learning. However, the concepts “engaged teaching” and “engaged learning” should be examined and conceptual frameworks developed to indicate how these concepts encompass all the forms of curricular engagement. Curricular Engagement can be subdivided into various types of educational approaches, teaching and learning strategies and activities, such as: community service; community-based education; internships; clinical practice or practicals; learnerships; experiential learning; co-operative education; community-based learning; academic service-learning; community service-learning; community-based projects; and community outreach.

The following criteria are proposed for deciding which form of Curricular Engagement might be most valuable for a specific context, institution, discipline and academic programme, and whether the selected form of curricular engagement is engaged teaching and learning (cf. Howard, 2001; Stacey, Rice & Langer, 2001):

- Engaged teaching and learning should encompass curriculum-based (credit-bearing) educational experiences designed, assessed and monitored by academic staff.
- Engaged teaching and learning should have a significant component of relevant and meaningful activity /intervention /service with the service agency and community (needs and assets identified by the community) as designed by the academic staff.
- Engaged teaching and learning should enhance student learning with the focus on integrative learning facilitated by the academic staff.
- Engaged teaching and learning should include purposeful civic learning that, for example, inculcates in students a sense of social responsibility and social justice facilitated by social responsible academic staff.
- Engaged teaching and learning should provide opportunities for structured reflection by students and facilitated by academic staff.

- Engaged teaching and learning should promote a scholarship of engagement and modelled by academic staff.

Many policy and university documents and websites in South Africa currently mention community engagement and service-learning in the same breath, but these two terms are not interchangeable. For a decade (1997-2007) we have grappled at higher education institutions in South Africa with various concepts and terms relating to community service and academic programmes that would best describe what we are actually doing in the curriculum, within a framework or model that seems appropriate to the HEI's vision, mission, strategic thrusts, objectives and promoting the scholarship of engagement (Bender, 2009).

The curricular engagement (CEng) paradigms, which I represent at the research university, are the following (Bender, 2009): CEng is scholarly work and contributes to teaching, research and the production of knowledge. A scholarship-based model of engagement involves both the act of engaging (bringing universities and communities together) and the product of engagement (the spread of discipline-generated, evidence-based practices in communities). CEng cuts across the mission of teaching/learning, research and service. It is not a separate, add-on activity or charity work, but a particular approach to university-community collaboration/partnership and should be part of the core curriculum. CEng should be reciprocal and mutually beneficial to all the engagement partners. There should be mutual planning, implementation and assessment among the engagement partners, and this could be addressed by integrating engaged teaching and learning in the curriculum. The provision of professional staff development for academic staff regarding teaching/learning and community engagement is critical if academics are to become knowledgeable about new educational theories and methods such as curricular engagement and pedagogy of engagement, and apply them effectively to the changing contexts of teaching and learning. It is the academic staff members who design and offer the courses containing engaged teaching and learning and who are ultimately responsible for curricular reform. I argue that change will only be embraced if there is an inner change in academic staff members' beliefs and plans. The purpose of this paper is to report on an exploration of the engagement and social responsibility of our academic staff members at a research intensive university.

The paper is structured in three main sections, indicating the different segments in the processes of educational change: the external, the internal and the personal (Goodson, 2001). The first section discusses the external educational change that is mandated in top-town manner, as is the case with the South African higher education policies relevant to community engagement and national initiatives. The second section deals with the internal educational change within higher education institutions that initiates and promotes change within the framework of strategies, support and enabling mechanisms for curricular engagement (model). The third section and main focus of this paper discusses the personal change in academics and the way that the pedagogy of engagement, as an educational approach and philosophy, and their social responsibility and responsiveness can be used as a vehicle for change in curricular engagement at HEIs in South Africa.

The greater the integration and harmonisation among the segments – the external, internal and the personal – the stronger the probability of greater force and momentum in the social movement underpinning educational change. The segments may at certain times be tightly interlinked and integrated. At other times, a greater degree of separation may be evident, but even in periods of separation these segments are in a close relationship to one another (Goodson, 2001). Most commonly, one of the segments becomes prominent in driving

educational change in a particular period and then for a time it dominates the coalition of change.

### **External educational change mandated by South African higher education policies relating to community engagement and national initiatives**

White Paper 3 (Department of Education., 1997) lays the foundation for making community service an integral and core part of higher education in South Africa. The White Paper refers specifically to the role of community service in the overarching task of transforming the higher education system. It calls on institutions to demonstrate, by making their expertise and infrastructure available, their commitment to the common good and to social responsibility. Since the publication of White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997), perceptions of community service have changed from a view of community service as one of the three silos of higher education – along with learning/teaching and research – to a view of community service as an integral and essential part of learning/teaching and research, infusing and enriching the latter two higher education functions with a sense of context, relevance and application. Accompanying this change in perception, there has been a shift in the terminology used by stakeholders in national higher education, such as the Department of Education and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) – from “community service” (Department of Education, White Paper, 1997) and “academically based community service” (HEQC Founding Document, 2001) to “community engagement” including Service-Learning (HEQC Audit Criteria, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c). The currently changing perception is moving towards the notion of a “scholarship of engagement” (HEQC/JET, 2006a). However, community engagement has many names and little or no research has been done on the scholarship of engagement in South Africa.

There are many national documents on the policies and JET/CHESP initiatives of community engagement (HEQC 2004a; 2004b, 2004c; HEQC/JET 2006a; 2006b; JET, 2006. Lazarus, 2007). Despite all the initiatives, at higher education institutions (the internal and personal segment of educational change) there is still a perception that community engagement and service are merely add-on, nice-to-have, philanthropic activities. Yet, in spite of the remarkable initiatives, trends and indicators we have had over the past decade, there is still confusion and a diversity of understanding about community engagement, curricular engagement and service-learning (Bender, 2009). Although many documents mention CE, curriculum-related CE and Academic Service-Learning in the same breath, these terms are not interchangeable.

It can be argued that from the above-mentioned policies, documents and initiatives, the external segment of educational change (top-down approach) is primary and has dominated the coalition or change since 1997. These policies, documents and initiatives are the externally mandated forces of change for the curricular engagement movement but this is only the beginning. External direction and the definition of large-scale reform or transformation do not ensure internally (at HEIs) implemented and sustained improvements. These are given complexities and call for institutional research to analyse and historically compare the fluctuating conditions of change at HEIs regarding curricular engagement. The methodology can be both historical and ethnographic (Creswell, 1998) and is recommended for institutional research at the research university.

## **Internal educational change within higher education institutions to initiate and promote curricular engagement**

The promise of curricular engagement lies in its potential to rejuvenate academia, redefine scholarship and involve society in a productive conversation about the role of education now and in the future. This section on internal educational change consists of a brief overview of a model which supports the implementation of curricular engagement. I developed a hypothetical institutional model of curricular engagement, which scrutinised the internal affairs of change (what should change at the institution) to provide pathways or strategies for educational changes. The model is divided into four levels: institutional leadership and management, quality management, faculty / school /department and programme / module and curricular engagement practices. The fundamental purpose of the model is to provide management support or pathways to establish the necessary conditions for exercising leadership and creating the internal educational change required to encourage academic staff members' involvement in curricular engagement (Bender, 2007; Fourie & Bender in HEQC/JET, 2007).

The model also emphasises the training and staff development initiatives. Academic staff members' involvement and support are two of the strongest indicators for the successful institutionalisation of community-engaged strategies. Community-engaged teaching and learning strategies have only recently been given attention in staff development activities. Such strategies challenge academics to go beyond the comfort zone of traditional practices – to incorporate new strategies of teaching and assessment in their teaching. For most academics this goes far beyond their prior experience. The importance of training and development opportunities for academic staff is undeniable, since the design and implementation of courses with engaged teaching and learning are ultimately responsible for curricular reform.

Models of educational change should reinstate the balance between internal affairs, the external framework and the personal perspectives of change. Internal agents have a considerable capacity to resist externally mandated change and, if academic staff morale is low and there is little investment by academic staff, change may remain more symbolic than substantive (Goodson, 2001). If educational change is to move from the realm of victorious symbolic action into the realm of substantive changes in curricular engagement practice, a new balance will have to be negotiated between personal, internal and external change. Only then will there be full engagement with the issues of sustainability and generalisability so that the forces of change can really move forward.

Without sensitivity to context, the new forces of change may be shipwrecked in the collision with the hard sedimentary rocks of existing higher education contexts. Externally mandated forces of change are all very well as a victorious symbolic action which announces the new curricular engagement with the emphasis on the pedagogy of engagement. However, the victory may be short-lived and unsustainable unless the HE councils and committees develop a sensitivity to the higher education context and to the academic staff members' personal missions and epistemologies or alternatively we may see the emergence of a new purpose and function for curricular engagement and engaged teaching strategies, which could be far removed from the mandated intentions.

## **Personal change in academics about engagement and social responsibility as a vehicle for change in Curricular Engagement at HEIs in South Africa**

The importance of inner or personal concerns has been repeatedly proven in studies of institutional life. Change most often begins with a transformation of people's personal perceptions and the curricula for courses of academic programmes, and then ripples outward into the social and institutional domain (Goodson, 2001). Hence, it is important and appropriate to give personal change the primary place in the analysis of educational change for curriculum reform and the integration of an engaged pedagogy in the core curriculum. This overturns the more institutionally driven theories of educational change. These theories look at how to get people to change in institutions, whereas the focus should be on how people change internally and on how that personal change then plays out, as the institution changes and through this institutional change (Fullan, 1999; 2001; Hargreaves, 2000; Goodson, 2001).

If people are to bring the crucial dimensions of passion and purpose into their institutional projects, such as academic programme design, curriculum development and reform, these institutional missions have to reach out and connect with the personal missions, epistemologies and emotions of their academic staff members (Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000). The academic's role in HEIs is so central that change theories and projects, which ignore the personal domain, are bound to miss their strategic objective by a wide margin.

The author's practice typically focuses on the facilitation of professional development training courses for academic staff in the theory and practice of curriculum and research-related community engagement (CRCE). In this section I share some of my observations and reflections gained from my experience of training 180 academic staff members in a module of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (2004-2008) and in a Service-Learning Capacity Building Programme funded by JET/CHESP (2005-2007) and a University Priority training course for academic staff members in Curricular and Research-related Community Engagement (2008-2010). However, I have selected the data of 40 participants from the latter. These are my current personal beliefs accumulated during my on-going learning journey about curricular engagement and engaged pedagogy and, as such, are part of a particular evolving mind-set. They are offered here to prompt and contribute to the readers' own exploration of a complex topic, such as engagement and social responsibility.

I work in an interpretative paradigm and have integrated my observations and reflections with the textual data obtained from dialogues during contact sessions and workshops, questionnaires before and after training, and also with the structured reflective journals of forty randomly selected the academic staff members involved in curricular engagement training in the at the research university. These academics represent various levels (lecturer to full professor and directors), faculties and disciplines. As stated by the academic staff members during contact sessions, workshops and in the questionnaires, their reflective journals, they bring their personal beliefs, perceptions, experiences and knowledge before, during and after their training and also before, during after the implementation of curricular engagement and engaged pedagogy in the courses or modules that they teach at a research university. I selected specific constructs and aspects for the purpose of this article. Certain aspects, such as resistance to the integration of engagement in the curriculum and the process of educational change, will be dealt with in a future article.

Based on the dialogue during regular contact sessions, workshops (“team learning and thinking together”) and content analysis of the open-ended questionnaires, reflective journals of academic staff members (2009-2010), I derived statements, constructs and criteria for the effectiveness of engagement in the curriculum of academic programmes. The findings are based on how academic staff changed internally in their beliefs and perceptions (mental models) of curricular engagement, from the start of the training course until the implementation of their modules/courses with curricular engagement activities, and changed their perceptions of curricular engagement and social responsibility as a vehicle for change in community engagement at universities in South Africa.

The participating academic staff members concurred that identifying a common definition of curricular engagement and engaged pedagogy at a research university would help to create consistency across courses/modules with, encourage academics / lecturers to provide a quality CEng experience for students, and enable academic staff to compare the impact of their CEng experiences with other academic staff members who are adopting CEng and engaged teaching as a pedagogical approach. Curricular engagement with the focus on engaged teaching and learning is one way for a university to meet its obligations to prepare future citizens for the responsibilities of citizenship. Engaged teaching and learning is also regarded as excellence in teaching and learning, as part of curriculum transformation (integrated in the curriculum), as an effective strategy for enhancing student learning, improving the quality of the students' experience and increasing higher education institutions' visibility and responsiveness to the neighbourhoods and communities around them. The pedagogy of engagement as a teaching strategy is gaining momentum in universities across South Africa because it promotes the development of cognitive complexity, citizenship skills, social responsibility, integrative learning, reflective learning, experiential learning and active learning, while at the same time responding to the pressing needs and burning issues of broader society. However, we should also acknowledge the ethical issues, challenges and risks of engaged teaching and learning.

Engaged teaching and learning is a complex educational approach which includes transforming the curriculum; changing the teaching and assessment methodologies; integrating different types of learning and learning styles; collaboration; building partnerships with external agencies and communities; as well as monitoring and evaluating the impact has on the students, academic staff, the community, agencies and the university (internal and external communities). All these aspects are regarded as the shared vision of, and meanings that academics have given to, curricular engagement and engaged pedagogy.

Engaged teaching and learning differ vastly from traditional classroom teaching, which is why academic staff nationally articulated the need for training and support in curricular engagement design and implementation (Bender, 2005). It is the academic staff who design and offer the modules /courses with engaged pedagogy, and who are ultimately responsible for curricular reform. Therefore, academic staff involvement and development are crucial to the long-term success and institutionalisation of engaged pedagogies worldwide (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Stacey & Bender, 2005).

Engaged-learning pedagogies share the assumption that knowledge is actively co-constructed by educators, learners and also members of the community with whom we are working, and is labelled as “strands of reform” in higher education. These “strands” include service-learning, community-based research, integrative learning, collaborative learning and problem-based learning (cf. Swaner, 2007)

Engaged pedagogies must move from being exceptions to being the building blocks for a fundamental transformation in the way academics “teach” and students “learn” in higher education. By shifting engaged pedagogy and its philosophical base from the periphery to the centre of educational practice, institutions will move toward establishing larger cultures of engagement which can harness the full promise of engaged learning (Swaner, 2007).

### **Discussion: Interlinking personal, internal and external sectors of educational change to ensure engagement and social responsibility in the core curriculum**

The pathways to educational change, such as curriculum reform and change from community service (philanthropy) or “add-ons” to the scholarship of engagement at HEIs in South Africa and hence integration into the core curriculum, require the systematic integration of external, internal and personal sectors in the change processes. The institutionalisation of curricular engagement depends on an accepted internal and personal mission, characterised by passion, purpose, investment and ownership. Change missions must be embedded in new institutionalised practices. To change education is to change academics’ work and vice versa. Educational change is also embedded in the wider community and therefore HEIs have to develop the community's awareness of new reforms. The community will have to be involved in the definition and negotiation of reform initiatives. Hence, the service providers and communities (external communities) with whom the universities have partnerships should also be regarded as a sector in the educational change process and call for more research. Curricular engagement is perhaps viewed as a small-scale movement where new missions are defined, practices initiated, supporters mobilised and finally partnerships formed. Acknowledgement of the social movement typical of the forces of change would develop a capacity to sustain and generalise change across academic staff (personal), higher education institution (internal) and national (policies and audits – external) sectors.

Educational change is most successful when curriculum reform sees academics' personal beliefs, internal missions and commitments as an inspiration for reform (which works best when carried out by academic staff members as part of their personal and professional tasks and functions) and also a necessary object of reform (the need to provide support for academic staff members to the point where they wish to take “ownership” of the reform).

In researching the paradigm shift from community service to curricular engagement in HEIs in South Africa, it is acknowledged that curricular engagement requires new methods and strategies, which in turn require training and skill building for the university staff and the community members with whom the university builds a partnership. It is proposed that creating and developing an “academy of community-engaged scholars” to deepen knowledge, share methods and improve practices should be a priority for the professional development of academic staff. Curricular engagement – and therefore the scholarship of engagement – is difficult work. It lies at the heart of what higher education is about and as such, it requires institution-wide effort, deep commitment at all levels and leadership from both the university and the community.

### **Conclusion**

The research into the curricular engagement movement and the educational change at HEIs in South Africa is significant because change, such as curricular engagement, promotes academic excellence and also because it is becoming more central to institutional change at universities in South Africa. It has an added significance, because academic staff members are pivotal to higher education, and their involvement is essential if curricular engagement is to be embedded in academic programmes. As a vehicle for change, curricular engagement and

pedagogy of engagement include greater institutional engagement and responsiveness to the needs of external communities and society. The research university addresses these needs by institutionalising engaged pedagogy and making the curriculum responsive to them.

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