



# Strategies and Outcomes of Involving University Students in Community Engagement: An Adaptive Leadership Perspective

Dipane Hlalele\*, Desiree Manicom\*\*, Julia Preece\*\*\*  
and Cias T. Tsotetsi\*\*\*\*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to compare how students and community members learned and applied their knowledge in four small-scale university–community engagement projects during 2013. It draws on the concept of adaptive leadership as an approach and analytical tool in a recently completed community engagement and service learning action research partnership between the University of the Free State (UFS) Qwa Qwa campus and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Pietermaritzburg campus. The project was funded by the National Research Foundation, with additional support from the UKZN Teaching and Learning Fund and UFS Faculty of Education research funds. A total of twelve case studies involved sixty-five students, nine NGOs and four schools. In each case, students worked in teams in response to community requests for assistance. Projects included Saturday curriculum activities for schools, workshops for parents, assisting with film making or archiving, assisting with monitoring and evaluation of rural reading clubs, producing small organic gardens and assisting with a childcare development project. Each case study involved end of project interviews with students and community contacts and some interim observations during the project implementation phase. This article compares four of the case study findings between the two institutions. It outlines how the concept of community engagement has evolved and briefly reviews the literature on community engagement, particularly in the South African

\* University of the Free State. Email: hlaleledj@qwa.ufs.ac.za

\*\* University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: manicom@ukzn.ac.za

\*\*\* University of KwaZulu-Natal. Email: preecej@ukzn.ac.za

\*\*\*\* University of the Free State. Email: tsotetsict@qwa.ufs.ac.za

context. It then introduces the theoretical framework and methodology. The findings suggested that the adaptive leadership approach contributed to stimulating shared ownership of learning.

### Résumé

Le but de cet article est de comparer la façon dont les étudiants et les membres de la communauté ont appris et appliqué leurs connaissances dans quatre projets à petite échelle sur l'engagement communautaire des universités en 2013. Il se fonde sur le concept de leadership adaptatif en tant qu'approche et outil d'analyse dans le cadre d'un projet récemment achevé de recherche-action sur l'engagement communautaire et l'apprentissage par le service communautaire, mené dans un partenariat entre le campus Qwa Qwa de l'Université de l'État-Libre (UFS) et le campus Pietermaritzburg de l'Université du Kwa Zulu-Natal (UKZN). Le projet a été financé par la « National Research Foundation » (Fondation nationale de la recherche) avec le soutien de l'« UKZN Teaching and Learning Fund » (Fonds d'éducation et de formation de l'UKZN) et les « UFS Faculty of Education research funds » (fonds de recherche de la Faculté de l'éducation de l'UFS). Au total, douze études de cas ont impliqué soixante-cinq étudiants, neuf ONG et quatre écoles. Dans chaque cas, les étudiants ont travaillé en équipe pour répondre aux demandes d'assistance communautaires. Cet article compare les deux institutions par rapport à quatre des résultats de l'étude de cas. Il décrit comment le concept d'engagement communautaire a évolué et fait brièvement la revue de la littérature sur ledit concept, en particulier dans le contexte sud-africain. Il présente ensuite le cadre théorique et la méthodologie. Les résultats suggèrent que l'approche de leadership adaptatif a stimulé l'appropriation partagée de l'apprentissage.

### Introduction

Community engagement (CE) is historically associated with the third mission of universities through various labels such as outreach, community service, service learning and community service learning. These labels all carry with them slightly different meanings. Initially, CE was regarded as a philanthropic exercise by universities towards communities in need. Kruss et al. (2011) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2009) among others explain that CE is now promoted as a mutually beneficial partnership with a range of actors including business and government ministries. The essence of this change in relationship is an emphasis on the co-creation of knowledge and collaboration between university and partnership members (Van Schalkwyck and Erasmus 2011).

The notion of community has also received much attention; it is an all-embracing term that may be geographical, social or ideological. Hall (2010: 23), for instance, describes community as:

<ext> a cluster of households or an entire region, as an organisation ranging from a provincial government department to an NGO, as a school, clinic, hospital, church or mosque or as a part of the university itself. ... Obviously, communities are a loosely defined set of social organisations. But community also functions as an adjective, as a qualifier that indicates work that is socially beneficial. <ends>

Schuetze (2010: 25) describes the concept of community engagement as:

<ext> the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. <ends>

The introduction of 'service learning' as a component of community engagement adds a further dimension. This definition has also evolved slightly since the one widely used by Bringle and Hatcher (1995) in the context of the United States, where the emphasis was on how students articulated their learning in communities which would then contribute to accreditation of student programmes, to an arrangement whereby students and communities work together for mutual benefit. An example of this latter definition is provided by Stellenbosch University (2009: 2) as follows:

<ext> An educational approach involving curriculum-based, credit-bearing learning experiences in which students (a) participate in contextualised, well-structured and organised service activities aimed at addressing identified service needs in a community, and (b) reflect on the service experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the linkage between curriculum content and community dynamics, as well as achieve personal growth and a sense of social responsibility. It requires a collaborative partnership context that enhances mutual, reciprocal teaching and learning among all members of the partnership (lecturers and students, members of the communities and representatives of the service sector). <ends>

In the context of service learning, particularly in South Africa, the focus is usually on addressing the needs of marginalized and often impoverished communities that are within travelling distance from the university campus. The impetus for this initiative derives from the nation's post-apartheid efforts to address the inequalities of its divisive history. The responsibility of universities

towards community engagement and service learning is enshrined in government policy (DoHET 2013). The ideology of a mutual partnership relationship in these contexts, however, often comes under scrutiny (Hlengwa 2010; Kruss 2012). Service learning requires extensive negotiation and preparation with attention to the inevitable power differentials that surface between an institution with status and resources and organizations or community locations which are targeted on the basis of defined need (Camacho 2004; Erasmus 2011; Preece 2013a).

Much has been written about service learning and the nature of student learning in the community engagement process. Concerns have been expressed about how power differentials are addressed in these contexts (Osman and Attwood 2007; Camacho 2004) and there has been some exploration, and critique, of how service learning is managed as a student-focused pedagogy that also services community needs (Bender 2008; Hlengwa 2010). The community perspective on the engagement relationship has also been discussed (Nduna 2007; Alperstein 2007; Preece 2013b). It is apparent that the very structure of many service learning courses militates against students contributing to lasting change in communities (Mahlomaholo and Matobako 2006). Students often have to manage their engagement activities within a full lecturing timetable and over a defined period of weeks, while community needs and activities do not necessarily coincide with such fixed timetables. Publications that pay attention to the organizational arrangements that facilitate such partnerships and how community learning spaces are created are less common (Preece and Manicom 2014). Comparative, qualitative studies of such experiences are also relatively rare.

This article compares the preliminary findings of two universities' efforts to involve their students in their local community by drawing on the skills and knowledge they obtained from their coursework. Twelve case studies were conducted (eight in one university and four in the other). The case studies were all short term projects lasting between six and twelve weeks. Some of them involved students from dedicated service learning courses; others drew on students from existing degree courses. In most cases the students were required to produce coursework that demonstrated learning from their community engagement project. The notion of service learning, according to the above definition, therefore, was interpreted loosely but required application of academic knowledge to a community-defined problem. An additional criterion for the students in the study was that they were expected to work in teams, thus requiring a sharing of ideas and understandings between themselves as students as well as in their community placement. The UFS university campus was situated in a rural location; the UKZN campus was located on the outskirts

of a small city with access to both urban and rural conditions. For reasons of space, only four case studies are discussed in detail in this article, two from the rural campus and two from the urban campus.

The theoretical concept of adaptive leadership (Heifetz 1994) was adopted as both an overall approach and a lens through which to interpret the findings. This concept was adopted because, in the university–community context, it allowed for a recognition that power differentials are an inherent feature of community engagement and that strategies are necessary to manage these differentials in the engagement process.

### **Adaptive Leadership**

Adaptive leadership is an organizational management term coined by Heifetz (1994). According to Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2009: 18) adaptive leadership is

<ext> The practice of mobilizing people to tackle ... challenges and thrive. Adaptive leadership is specifically about change that enables the capacity to thrive. New environments and new dreams demand new strategies and abilities, as well as the leadership to mobilize them. Adaptation relies on diversity. <ends>

Heifetz's (1994: 69–73) theory of adaptive leadership provided a valuable contribution to understanding how communities may be engaged in the process of development. In this theory, different strategies are followed in different contexts or situations. Heifetz discusses three distinct situations leading to leadership responses, strategies and approaches. The first and probably the most common one is the 'Type I' situation where leaders conclude that the challenge requires only their or their team's technical expertise. Burke (2007: 419) states that Heifetz referred to this as the absence of leadership. In community development contexts, many communities may not challenge the expert's solution. In some cases, the expert may not have understood the situation to the same level as the members of the community would have understood it. At this point, examples of many urban solutions which have been used for rural ecologies bear testimony. A vivid example is the rebuilding of schools in tornado-prone rural areas of the Eastern Cape Province (Mniki 2009).

In the 'Type II' situations, leaders see a problem as requiring some interaction with the community and in so doing view it as a shared challenge that warrants the involvement of the community. This approach, according to Burke (2007: 419), combines the leader's expertise, persuasive powers, and input of the communities. However, this type is characterized by limited leadership.

In many instances, however, leaders and ‘experts’ do not have readily available feasible solutions to seemingly intractable situations. These are what Heifetz (1994) calls ‘Type III’ situations. Whilst the communities may remain content with quick, tried and tested easy solutions to their problems, Burke (2007: 419), in relation to this context, calls for an ‘honest and courageous leader who would demonstrate the need for redefining the problem, changing priorities, and possibly greater sacrifice from the members’. Although this level of leadership in small scale projects is inevitably limited, the Type III situation provides space for dialogue in university–community or community–university relations. This leads to the need for ongoing clarification of competing roles and responsibilities. It also shifts power relations so that the ‘expert’ becomes a participant who may, like all members of the community, learn from others. For individuals in positions of power, this may not be an easy shift. Although the problems were necessarily small scale, we sought, through the study, to place students in situations that made them full members of the communities with no better status or credibility than that of the communities with whom they were to engage. Their leadership role, therefore, included encouraging community or organizational participants to ‘clarify values and make progress on the problems those values define’ as a dialogic process (Heifetz 1994: 5). Heifetz (1994: 25) summarizes this as ‘working within society’s own frame of reference’.

Heifetz’s theory further distinguishes between two types of problems that communities face. Drawing from Heifetz’s work Kania and Kramer (2011: 39) refer to technical and adaptive problems. Technical problems are those that are well defined; the solution is known in advance, and one or a few organizations may be able to provide that. Adaptive problems are, by contrast, more intricate and complex; the solution is not known, and no single entity may be able to provide the appropriate service. Educational transformation and health renewal may be classified as adaptive problems. In adaptive leadership it becomes extremely important for the leader to be fully ‘present’ to comprehend what is happening with a view to framing key issues and questions from within the social group. A facilitative, inclusive approach is key to ensuring lasting impact (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky 2009; Eubank et al. 2012: 243). This is in line with Kania and Kramer’s work titled ‘Catalytic Philanthropy’, where they make reference to the fact that mobilizing multiple organizations and stakeholders may be messier and slower. For example, a rural community may decline a particular process because it does not augur well or resonate with their ways of existence, unless they are given the opportunity for shared ownership and understanding of change.

An adaptive leadership approach may challenge and inspire students and afford them the opportunity to lead and stimulate change in community contexts by adopting context-sensitive strategies for dialogue and mutual problem solving. This requires stepping out of their everyday environment, gaining insights into a range of social issues and ‘reframing’ their challenges through a process of community engagement. It also entails developing a greater understanding of group dynamics and increasing awareness of one’s own behavioural patterns and how they impact on others (Adaptive Leadership Intensive 2013). It is a trust-building process whereby a diversity of views is respected (Heifetz 1994). Since community projects are often multi-layered in terms of relationship structures, this action research project and its academic facilitators encouraged students to engage with those multiple levels of participants in their projects. In summary, the focus was on encouraging community ownership of the engagement initiatives, ongoing dialogue to clarify competing goals and values, and sensitizing students to the need to respect and value diverse community perspectives with a view to contributing to community-identified development challenges. Community engagement relies on these adaptive leadership principles, and in their service learning, students were encouraged to apply these principles in their community engagement projects. As students and university lecturers engage with and serve communities, they need to observe these principles. For example, communities need to feel that problems and solutions are theirs and not those of the students and/or lecturers.

### Methodology

This was an action research project because it was more than simply a data collection process. The research focus was on improving what exists by exploring what works and what could be improved, listening to the views of all partners and taking action to address the challenges raised (Stringer 2004). The project went through four phases. They were as follows:

**Phase 1:** Consultation with relevant organizations and academic departments to match potential students with relevant disciplinary knowledge to the community-identified problem or task.

**Phase 2:** Discussions between organizations and students in preparation for the task.

**Phase 3:** Ongoing monitoring by research assistants and researchers during the case study phase, followed by interviews and focus group discussions with all participants (staff, students, NGO organizers, participating community members).

**Phase 4:** Feeding back our findings to the participants and discussion of ways forward.

The case studies themselves emerged after several consultations with different NGOs following a public stakeholder meeting at each institution. It was a process of trying to match ‘this’ problem with ‘those’ students and negotiating how the student’s timetable constraints could interface with the timetable demands of the participating community organization.

Ethical clearance was obtained from each university; all organizations gave permission for participants to be interviewed and each individual interviewee signed an informed consent form that promised anonymity whilst allowing the researchers to record and publish findings. Interviews with key community participants and students took place either individually or in focus groups, depending on which process was deemed most appropriate for obtaining honest and frank answers (Krueger and Casey 2000). In each case community members were interviewed in their preferred language (Sesotho in Qwa Qwa and isiZulu in KwaZulu-Natal) and the digital recordings were transcribed into English.

The research questions relevant to this article were:

1. How did the communities, university staff and students engage with each other?
2. To what extent did the adaptive leadership philosophy contribute to the engagement relationship and its outcomes?

Transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions formed the main source of data, though field notes on the preparation phases were also available. The precise form of data collection varied across the case studies according to the circumstances of the participants through what Barton and Tusting (2005) have called ‘responsive methodology’. Transcripts for each case study were scrutinized by their respective university research teams for patterns of responses and then coded thematically, drawing on the adaptive leadership framework as an evaluative tool for analysing the data. The cross comparison of findings took place during university team meeting discussions at subsequent conferences during 2014. This entailed a process of verification, cumulation, generalization and application (Schweisfurth 2001: 219) whereby common criteria were used for the engagement process, as stated through the adaptive leadership approach, and then the cases were examined in relation to what was happening at micro-level in order to gain ‘insight rather than overview’ and generate patterns that could inform our analytical understanding across all the cases. For reasons of space only two case studies from each institution are discussed here. They are introduced under their separate university headings.

## The case studies

### *University of the Free State, Qwa Qwa campus*

In the first case study an NGO requested student assistance in conducting awareness raising workshops with parents in order to improve their children’s literacy levels. Two meetings were held to discuss ways in which the students could be placed with the organization. After the second interaction between the researchers and two representatives of the NGO, a workshop was conducted to train the students to conduct workshops with parents. The coordinators from the NGOs contacted the school where workshops would be held by the students after the training session. Nineteen students conducted five workshops in Sesotho, the local language.

The second case study did not have an NGO to mediate between the university and the school. In 2013 a school teacher asked the university for student assistance in the teaching of Mathematics, Social and Natural Sciences in two grade nine classes. Nine university students were tasked to teach on Saturdays.

Separate focus groups were held with the university students and teachers from the school. For the literacy programme, a focus group was conducted with both university students and school parents who participated in the workshops.

### *University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus*

Both projects took place over a period of six weeks. The first project involved two isiZulu-speaking political science students in making a film on poverty and hunger in the wider Pietermaritzburg area. The lead NGO worked with a local film-making organization to produce the film.

Students assisted with logistical preparations such as liaising with the various households about filming times, dates and requirements and passing this information on to the NGO and film making crew. Students then acted as translators between the crew and the community and vice versa.

At an initial meeting between the NGO, the film crew and students, the NGO director led the discussion on the envisaged role of the students and the nature of the project. Times and days were negotiated. At the end of the six week period, the two students and the NGO director were interviewed regarding the benefits and challenges of the service learning experience.

The second NGO trains local members of a semi-rural township to facilitate morning crèche activities with pre-school age children whose families cannot afford the fees of a formal nursery school. Parents are encouraged to attend and join in the nursery activities, though they rarely do more than observe. Two third year students from the education and development disciplines met in the township with the NGO’s trainer, the local coordinator and the early child

development facilitators to receive some training on the kind of activities that might be employed to support one of the crèche facilitators.

At the end of the six weeks, the students, facilitator, coordinator and two observing parents were separately interviewed for their assessment of what benefits and challenges the arrangement had revealed.

The findings for all four case studies are presented in terms of key themes that emerged and could be relevant for leading adaptively: building on community assets, paying attention to power differentials, dialogue, shared learning and stimulating change. Respondents and case studies are categorized as follows:

<b>Project</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Community member (parent)</b>	<b>Community facilitator</b>	<b>NGO contact / teacher</b>
Early child development CS1	S1, S2	P1, P2	CF	NGO
Film-making project CS2	S1, S2			NGO
Literacy project CS3	S1, S2 etc	P1, P2 etc		T1, etc
Maths and sciences project CS4	S1, S2 etc	P1, etc	CF	T1 etc

## Findings

### *Building on community assets*

The students took their responsibility seriously, recognizing the existing knowledge of communities, and learned to respect the contributions that community members were making within their own environments, even when it appeared that assets were limited.

<ext> The role they [community facilitators] play is ... a very empowering role ... even though they know that they have nothing at all in life but they see that they can do something with their lives ... the parents of the children they are teaching trust them ... even though they know that they are not qualified teachers (CS1, S1). <ends>

Similarly, with case study 2 it was evident that because NGOs work closely with communities on the ground they are aware of the issues confronting communities. The NGO director explained the organization's approach to community knowledge and to creating awareness of community issues at different levels of involvement:

<ext> So there are two levels: the level on which the film is telling the story through the eyes of the community people, but [also] external people who have knowledge on the context of food prices (CS2, NGO). <ends>

In the literacy project the students learned from the parents how to handle learners, so that in order to motivate children to do better; the children's responses have to be handled with decency:

<ext> I also learnt that you have to address your child in a decent manner. Attempt to use different strategies to help the child discover the correct answer. Do not say the child is stupid [dumb] as this may make or break the child's future (CS3, S1). <ends>

This included encouraging children to aspire to greater heights in life:

<ext> As a teacher you need not be negative when you ask learners about their future careers. You should encourage the child to work harder (CS3, S2). <ends>

At the same time, in the spirit of adaptive leadership and in recognition of the power differentials between a university and a community setting, students were asked to comment on how they managed to address that challenge.

### *Paying attention to power differentials*

The early child development project students revealed it was not always easy to gauge how to interact with their facilitator:

<ext> This was a learning curve that this [project] is their baby so we were afraid to raise some points because maybe she would take it as though you are undermining her position. That was also a challenge for us (CS1, S2). <ends>

This meant that they had to find ways of introducing new ideas that did not alienate her. So they learned to imagine how the facilitator might feel and be sensitive to her context:

<ext> What I learned was the facilitators they take this job very seriously, it is kinda like it's their baby and if someone else from the outside tries to intrude somewhere ... you are attacking them personally so ... if you want to intervene ... do it in a way that ... does not seem as if you are attacking them, in a way that we are here to learn (CS1, S1). <ends>

### *And slowly they built a relationship whereby each would support the other:*

<ext> We were second facilitators ... but we were not superior to her. We tried to work as a team with her ... she would let us do our thing and she would continue with her thing. So we tried to play the same role as her even though she is the more educated one when it comes to ECD and children ... but in the eyes of the children ... we were also their teacher ... she would say 'these are your teachers' (CS1, S2). <ends>

The students in the film project recognized that they were dealing with several layers of participants but that the main decision-makers were the film-making company:

<ext> our focus was on the communication and logistics stuff so to write appointments and stuff so [NGO] and the film makers would ac-

tually make the big decisions and what we actually did was ensure that everyone was available, you know. Perhaps if they were not available on Tuesday then we would have to settle for another day which was gonna accommodate everyone of us and ensure everyone is there and not left behind so they took bigger decisions like for [film crew], they are the film makers they are the ones shooting so we can't agree on a day on which they are going to deal with something else, we have to hear from them if they can come (CS2, S2). <ends>

Both the literacy project students and the community parents learnt something from their collective participation. Learning from one another balanced unequal power relations. It was not only parents whose patience was tested; students also felt that the project enhanced their ability to manage patience:

<ext> As university students, this project assisted us to gauge our patience towards people (CS3, S1). <ends>

Parents also appreciated university students' demonstration of love and respect:

<ext> We appreciate the respect (CS3, P1).  
We thank you people [university students]; we thank you very much (CS3, P2). <ends>

A key ingredient for ensuring such a positive working relationship was to engage in dialogue.

### **Dialogue**

This process of building constructive dialogue took time. At first for the students in case study 1, their efforts appeared to flounder. For instance, they built on the trainer's advice to bring in plastic cartons to use as resources for the children, but did not realize that the facilitator would not necessarily have the skills to develop these resources:

<ext> We didn't know how to do certain things with her [the community based child development facilitator], how do we engage with her in doing something because ... we took the plastics to her and said here are the plastics what should we do? ... and she was like 'eish I don't know as well'. (CS1, S2) <ends>

It then became apparent that ideas must be introduced slowly and with time to allow for clarification and competing agendas. Most importantly this required an opportunity for all participants to respond and get used to new ideas:

<ext> What we learned ... if we have ideas that we want to implement ... inform her that okay, we are thinking of this, to do this, is it alright? So that the other person is in the loop ... by the time we arrive she knows already that this is what's going to happen (CS2, S1). <ends>

The students from the film project commented on the ongoing dialogue that happened between all parties to make the project work:

<ext> Well in terms of making decisions we all discussed it, there were emails, when we see each other. Like they worked around our time and we worked around their time we all compromised something in like, ja. And then we contributed by availing ourselves or trying to work around each other's time like we couldn't clash, if you get what I am saying . We all compromised time and whatever (CS2, S2). <ends>

The UFS students who were placed in the literacy booster project commented that they were able to discuss with parents and teachers and as a result they could work with other students whose perspectives, regarding certain issues, were different from theirs. 'My answer should not be the only correct answer', said one student. In conducting workshops, students complemented each other's presentations:

<ext> If I were to do the seven sessions alone, it would have been impossible for me. Because of the other members of the team, it is now possible and enjoyable (CS3, S4). <ends>

Furthermore, in the initiative where grade nine learners were taught by the students, the initial dialogue made students realize the need for personal sacrifice in terms of time. They learnt the need to keep a balance between their academic work and the community engagement requirements:

<ext> It was sometimes a challenge. You will find that sometimes you would be writing on Monday, and sometimes you are given material on Friday to prepare for Saturday (CS4, S1). <ends>

He explained that because of the initial discussion to help the learners, they were continuing with their university work after classes:

<ext> After the lesson you will have to come back and continue with the university academic work (CS4, S1). <ends>

Most importantly, the discussions between different community members ultimately provided opportunities for shared learning.

### ***Shared learning***

A key outcome of the dialogue which engaged in clarifying competing values and purposes was the opportunity to build on each other's knowledge base. So, for instance, the local child development facilitator in the UKZN case study realized the benefits of new ideas, especially when she was allowed to steer the intervention in a way that recognized her knowledge of the children and their learning abilities.

<ext> If they have an opinion they would share and I would also do the same when I had an opinion about the children ... see they are also educated – they came with the shapes and the robots ... [but] this one day they finished with shapes and proposed to teach them about robots. We told them no, they shouldn't – these children are still young, they shouldn't learn everything at once in a day (CS1, CF1). <ends>

Within the space of six weeks both students felt they were learning:

<ext> I gained an understanding that children don't learn in the same way as adults and that children learn in a slow pace and that you need to be patient ... also kids learn things better if its visual ... it must be ... colourful and bright (CS1, S1). <ends>

And the facilitator felt she was working in a partnership relationship:

<ext> We had different ideas and worked in a good partnership ... we used to discuss things; agree that they can take over now. They would tell the story they prepared and I would also tell some of their stories that they've told (CS1, F1). <ends>

Students from the film project learnt directly about poverty and its effects on people, issues that they were dealing with in their university courses which contributed to their linking theory to practice:

<ext> There are things we aren't aware of as I live in a kind of incubater-ish community, ja. Yes I did gain some information ... like on Saturday when the participants are actually talking about their situations you could see that some things went beyond hunger and everything and it was more psychological, ja you could just read it through their body language so it affected them more than, so it did go with my psychology module [more] than my with my politics module (CS2, S1). <ends>

Another student explained further that this experiential learning is powerful and can be emotional:

<ext> It hit me hard emotionally; I think that I put my heart too much into it. I learnt that that it could be visible to society that a certain household is coping. ... But in that household things are going wrong that nobody can see. People go days without eating and yet they still work (CS2, S2). <ends>

From the perspective of the NGO director he felt that they also learnt from the students from the project because the dialogue between participants' knowledge was shared:

<ext> It also helped us from the point of view of, mmm, the students themselves because they sometimes suffer the same issues that the people in the community suffer they helped to bring also another dimension of understanding of food insecurity to the script ... so because they also took part in the discussion, they also said things which was quite interesting stuff, like what is happening at varsity and how there is hunger in hostels (CS2, NGO). <ends>

In the literacy project one single-minded student reported that she had acquired the knowledge and skill of discussing and working together with people of opinions different from hers. She said that she had learnt to work together with other people and accommodate views different from hers:

<ext> I also learnt to take other's points of view into consideration; I should not be the only one who enjoys prominence (CS3, S5). <ends>

As for the maths and natural sciences case study, our findings revealed that the students were able to link what they were taught at the university to what they were expected to teach at school. The students further experienced that in some

instances the university's programmes were not preparing them sufficiently for the workplace: 'When it comes to Geography there is little map work that is being done', commented one student, 'so that places a lot of pressure on us as students when we are in the field. We struggle because we were not equipped well on that part'. Two other students shared similar sentiments:

<ext> From the first year to the third year, we haven't learnt anything about map work. We started learning when we were looking at the method of teaching Geography. Luckily, we got some information from one high school so that we could know the formula to calculate the gradient (CS4, S3).

We were provided with textbooks with no information on the topics to be presented. For an example, we were to teach about the gradient. But only to find that there is no information about the gradient. I then went to Mr Vxxx at S Secondary School. I asked information about the practical. He provided me with the topographical and ortho-photo maps. This made the practical to be possible as some of the calculations were to be taken from the map. We found that at the school there were no maps. We tried to download some maps from the internet, but we could not get the correct one. So I have learnt that if I am given a topic to present I need to search for some information instead of folding my arms (CS 4, S4). <ends>

An important concern of adaptive leadership is the application of such strategies to stimulate change. The projects were small-scale and it was difficult to assess the extent to which lasting change might have been implemented. Nevertheless there were signs that the students were keen to introduce change and in most projects there was evidence of change in attitudes at community level, albeit tentative at this stage.

### ***Stimulating change***

The parents involved in the UFS literacy project began to recognize a number of ways in which they were able to assist their children. This included working with other children in addition to their biological children.

<ext>I am able to assist other children other than mine (CS3, P1).  
<ends>

Some affirmed that they were better able to care for their children after participating in the initiative:

<ext> I did not have that patience for children. Now I am no more impatient with them (CS3, P3). <ends>

Others felt they were now able to assist their children, taking them step-by-step:

<ext> I read and guide my child. When she asks questions I respond. She did not know the meaning of the word 'hygiene' and I explained it to her (CS3, P4). <ends>

Parents also recognized that they should create time to be with their children in order to assist them when doing their homework:

<ext> If there is anything I am doing, I immediately leave it and assist my children if there is a need (CS3, P5). <ends>

Many parents pointed out that they were able to assist their children at home:

<ext> [even with homework] I now understand that the child does not only need to be taught at school, but at home as well (CS3, P1).

I am now able assist my child to hold a pen, as I have been taught to do so (P2). <ends>

They demonstrated that they were now using a variety of strategies to make learning fun:

<ext> I did not present what I was reading in an interesting manner, without actions. That is why the children were bored because I was just reading (P6). <ends>

The project also created a bond between parents and their children. Parents said that they were now able to discuss matters that they were unable to discuss before participating. For example:

<ext> There were things I could not discuss with the children but now I can. The children find it easier to approach me now. This change seems to have cemented the relationship I have with my children (P3). <ends>

In the early child development project, from their own perspective the students felt they introduced new ideas:

<ext> Since we are students ... I think we have like more, fresher ideas of teaching children compared to the facilitators there; even though it

was threatening but then we had fresher ideas. We had new ways of implementing the teaching ... we tried to have more fun ways of learning for the kids (CS1, S1). <ends>

The facilitator felt both empowered as a facilitator and, as a result, that her role was being taken more seriously by the children's parents. The very fact that university students were taking part in the project had created a new power dynamic that gave the it new legitimacy:

<ext> We were very happy to be with you [students] and the children also saw – and I also saw that I am also important ... the children and parents saw that this is a legitimate thing ... we wish that you people could come back again because your presence has been noted by the parents.... Your presence helped because some parents thought this was just a game. Some even refused to allow their children to come ... now they saw that this thing of teaching from home is serious ... because of the students that came and brought some of their things as well and they saw (CS1, CF). <ends>

In support of this change of attitude, the parents indicated increased interest in the idea of playing a supportive role in their children's crèche. Although this may simply have reflected a desire by the parents to please the interviewer:

<ext> No I haven't played any role [in the crèche] ... but now that you have asked me this you have motivated me to start taking part (CS1, P1). <ends>

... there were indications that the parents were now taking a closer interest in the learning needs of their children:

<ext> I say UKZN did a very good job because the arrival of the two girls made ... how do I put this? The work they brought with them was a little different from what the teacher had. They came with shapes, taught triangles, square and circles ... things they've [the children] have never done ... it was a beautiful thing and they understood it and know it. They [students] also reward the children. When a child did well they gave him/her a star. You see things like that encourage a child (CS1, P2). <ends>

The facilitator, too, indicated a greater willingness to try out new ideas:

<ext> You [students] have played a massive role, for example you brought us posters that will assist us when we are telling a story to the children; you also helped us with the shapes that you made for us to show them what a shape is and how it looks (CS1, CF). <ends>

The NGO director of the film-making project felt that because of issues that students raised about student hunger that:

<ext> They [students] enriched the process through their thinking engagement ... I could see a possible connection for this for not this year but later on in the year because I have friend of mine in the university who is working on issues of hunger in the hostels so mmm, it might lead on to something like perhaps another DVD or something (CS2, NGO). <ends>

The director was also hopeful that the film produced during this project would be a catalyst for change in the lives of the community:

<ext> If this film can get a wide audience and can get a conversation going within a sitting about this phenomenon, about hunger, inevitably different role players would have to start doing something about it. Mmm, it becomes a social justice movement (CS2, NGO). <ends>

## Discussion

Each project entailed similar strategies for organizing the service learning initiative. For instance there were several preparatory meetings between the students and community organizations. Sometimes there were two layers of participation, such as between academic staff and students and the initiating organization. Occasionally there was a third layer of participation, such as for the early child development and literacy projects where the NGO acted as a mediator between university and community facilitators. But the project 'beneficiaries' – at community grass-roots level – were only involved at the evaluation interview stage. This signifies that in these case studies the community engagement relationship remains embedded in a partnership for development 'for' rather than 'with' the community at grass-roots level. The partnership 'with' relationship is with a mediating NGO or school. Such an organizational strategy is perhaps unavoidable for short term service learning projects but it does highlight a potential limitation for community engagement partnerships that aspire to contributing to community change.

Nevertheless, the community-based learning spaces provided opportunities for students to understand the context-specific challenges of Heifetz's (1994; Burke 2007) Type III problems where there are no easy technical solutions. A prime example of this adaptability in action was evident in the natural sciences classes where students had to use their own initiative to acquire the necessary practical resources. At the same time the community spaces provided a unique opportunity for shared learning whereby nearly all the respondents shared how they had learned from each other. This suggests that the non-formalized nature of community environments creates a resource for collective learning whereby new relationship dynamics and forms of dialogue take place. Within these spaces students and community members learn to recognize the value of pooling assets, skills, knowledge and understanding. Within that process of informally re-framing key issues and questions and facilitating learning for mutual problem-solving, students had to step out of their everyday learning environment and build trust with their diverse community contacts (Heifetz 1994). The follow-up interviews indicated that the students had contributed to stimulating change amongst community members, particularly in the projects involving children, but also at NGO-level in relation to the food security film-making project.

On the one hand, therefore, these case studies indicated the potential of an adaptive leadership approach to contribute to community change through small-scale service learning projects. They also indicated the need for extensive preparations prior to the engagement activity and the limitations of what can be achieved in terms of working with grass-roots communities – unless a mediating organization can maintain continuity after the student interventions. The extent to which change is sustained could not be ascertained in these case studies in view of the time limited nature of the research study. Nevertheless the comparative element of these four case studies can produce some tentative conclusions.

### Concluding remarks

Each university focused on different contexts but the process of adaptive leadership produced similar outcomes in terms of facilitating shared ownership and development of knowledge which builds on community assets, and is sustained through a process of dialogue. This relationship in turn stimulated motivation for change among students and community members. In such diverse and multi-layered community contexts there is a need for constant vigilance regarding power dynamics between university and community levels. But often this power differential can have positive effects in that the very presence of university interest in community initiatives can stimulate a sense

of self-worth and self-respect, which in turn motivates enhanced community activity. However, in order to maximize such potential there must be ongoing dialogue and respect for diverse views.

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