

# Community participation in higher education service learning

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As a point of entry to local communities the curricular form of community engagement referred to as “service learning” has gained prominence in South African higher education institutions over the past decade. Thus far research on service learning has mostly been conducted to gauge student development and learning outcomes, while outcomes for community participants have received less attention. This article reports on research into the outcomes of a specific service learning module by involving community members as research participants. Suggestions are made for ensuring that participants from local communities play a more active role in their own empowerment through transformative service learning interactions with university students, lecturers and other participants.

## Gemeenskapsdeelname in hoëronderwys-diensleer

Die kurrikulêre vorm van gemeenskapsbetrokkenheid waarna verwys word as diensleer het gedurende die afgelope dekade veld gewen in Suid-Afrikaanse hoëronderwysinstellings as 'n toegangspoort tot plaaslike gemeenskappe. Tot dusver is navorsing oor diensleer meestal onderneem om studente-ontwikkeling en -uitkomst te bepaal terwyl uitkomst vir deelnemers uit die gemeenskap minder aandag ontvang het. Navorsing is onderneem om die uitkomst van 'n spesifieke diensleermodule te ondersoek deur gemeenskapslede as deelnemers in die navorsing te betrek. Voorstelle word gemaak om te verseker dat deelnemers uit plaaslike gemeenskappe 'n meer aktiewe rol speel in hul eie bemagtiging deur transformatiewe diensleerinteraksie met universiteitstudente, dosente en ander deelnemers.

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The notion of transformation has prevailed since the first South African democratic elections in 1994. The Founding Provisions of the country's new Constitution (RSA 1996) declare that there is "a common South African citizenship" and that all citizens are equally entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship; and equally subject to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. It was generally accepted that the higher education sector would play a key leadership role in shaping the new country that was envisaged and that it would thus have to undergo a transformation process of its own. In the *education white paper 3: a programme for higher education transformation* (DoE 1997) higher education institutions (HEI) were called upon to "demonstrate social responsibility [...] and their commitment to the common good". Thus the foundation was laid for making community engagement a part of higher education, to be integrated with research, teaching and learning. One and a half decades since the adoption of the Constitution and *Education white paper 3* there are still many contestations relating to the public role of universities. Hall (2010: 2) states that the imperative of community engagement is still regarded as "radical, risqué and anything other than taken for granted".

Consensus has not been reached regarding the most effective ways in which higher education institutions (HEIs) should address engaging with local communities. Albertyn & Daniels (2009: 410) point out that South African HEIs need to infuse community engagement in their teaching, learning and research cultures to "facilitate the manner in which institutions decide to embrace CE". In this article the community-based educational approach referred to internationally as service learning (or community service learning) is presented as one form of community engagement that higher education institutions can explore in contributing to the reconstruction and development of the country. It is premised that service learning also creates the opportunity for more people to enjoy their rights and take up their responsibilities as South African citizens.

It is broadly accepted that the full complexity of development dynamics and power-related confounding factors inherent in community engagement endeavours such as service learning is not reflected

in South African studies as yet.<sup>1</sup> This article raises the question as to how service learning could be utilised to become a robust, transformative intervention that contributes substantially to constructive participation and empowerment of local communities.

## 1. Contextualisation: accepting the challenges

The Central University of Technology (CUT), where the study was undertaken, is located in the Free State province of South Africa. In a recent address, Mokhele (2010), who chaired the Regional Steering Committee for a project commissioned by the OECD,<sup>2</sup> expressed his shock concerning the OECD Report which shows that the Free State is in a state of continued decline regarding most major human development and economic indices. Given the political, social and economic realities of the two Free State universities – the CUT and the University of the Free State (UFS) – one has to conclude, with Mokhele (2010: 3), that they are left with no other “morally legitimate path” to the international status they are seeking but “through addressing and conquering the most serious challenges of [their] immediate environs”. This statement echoes the contention of Albertyn & Daniels (2009: 410) that the implications of globalisation for development, “specifically within the politico-historical African/South African context, increase the urgency of being responsive to communities where HEIs are situated”.

On a micro-scale, the service learning module as the focus of this article aims to address the meso- and macro-scale challenges of our country and province. An investigation into the community outcomes of the module was intended to be a modest contribution to the current deliberative exploration of robust, constructive forms of higher education engagement with the communities served by these institutions.

1 *Cf* Alperstein 2007, Laattoe 2007, Mahlomaholo & Matobako 2006, Nduna 2007, Osman & Attwood 2007.

2 The Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) commissions these projects worldwide to review the role of higher education in regional and city development.

The experiential, community-oriented pedagogy of service learning entered the South African higher education scene via an initiative that was strongly supported from the USA, where service learning first developed. The Community – Higher Education – Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative emerged in 1999 (JET 1999) as a national project to promote and support service learning in the context of the transformation of higher education institutions in South Africa. Since CHESP was to a large extent funded by charitable foundations from the USA through the then Joint Education Trust (JET), service learning entered the higher education scene as a well-defined curricular form of community engagement through the guidance of several USA experts working in the field (*cf* Hatcher & Erasmus 2008). A key aim of this strategy was to embed community engagement in the higher education sector (Lazarus *et al* 2008).

The CHESP vision was that universities were to contribute to the public good, *inter alia* by assisting the service sector (public, private and community-based), through student activities and/or research expertise, in providing a better service to communities. In this way they could contribute to the development of such communities. The grant-making strategy of CHESP was geared to achieve this in the long run. Although CUT was not one of the first seven universities who participated in the initiative, it joined the neighbouring UFS and others in November 2002, when JET approved its second CHESP Grant Strategy, namely for 2003 and 2004. The strategy involved the participation of several higher education institutions in addition to those that had already benefited at that stage, to pilot service learning programmes through appropriate community, higher education, and service sector partnerships (JET 2002: 2). These triad partnerships were crucial to meeting the aims and objectives of the grant and establishing service learning as an entry point to communities.

In 2003 the Department of Clothing and Fashion at the CUT utilised the CHESP Logic Model to plan, implement and evaluate the service learning module in Sewing Technology for the Clothing and Fashion students and members of the community of Rocklands in Mangaung (Bloemfontein, Free State). During the planning phase,

the Logic Model was completed in collaboration with a service sector partner, namely the non-profit organisation (NPO) Lesedi la Setjhaba consisting of a group of women who assist the Rocklands community with sewing and craft projects. At this stage the NPO also negotiated on behalf of the community members who would eventually benefit from the initiative. Idealistic outcomes such as community empowerment, better living standards and improved quality of life were envisaged for the community.

After the module had been implemented for five years, the authors<sup>3</sup> realised that no systematic evaluation of the above outcomes of the service learning module for community members had yet been undertaken for purposes of improving the module. This article aims to report on insights and new understanding gained through a collaborative study that was conducted to evaluate the achievement of community outcomes. The article provides a concise conceptual framework of service learning, and discusses the role of partnerships in service learning. The research procedures and results are explained briefly, with recommendations drawn regarding ways in which service learning could become more conducive to making the voice of the community clearly audible within the context of higher education engagement.

## 2. Literature review

Given the strategy of the national JET/CHESP initiative to contribute to the transformation of higher education through the development of service learning programmes, several of the higher education institutions involved have implemented service learning programmes (mostly in the form of individual modules) over the past 10 years. These programmes have contributed considerably to the development of service learning partnerships between communities, higher education institutions and the various service sector role players (public, private, and NPOs). However, Nduna (2007: 69) noted the general trend that far too few studies

3 The first author was the module convenor, and thus provided an “insider” perspective, while the second author was involved as external “expert”.

in the field focus on the voices of the community members within these partnerships, in contrast with the large body of scholarly literature dedicated to the impact of service learning on students. Making a contribution to filling this gap was one of the objectives of the research that is reported in this article. The other was to improve the service learning module in Sewing Technology by deliberately listening to what the community members had to say about it.

In the literature, relevant areas of focus include a brief background to the development of service learning in the USA and South Africa; conceptualising and theorising service learning, and an outline of the partnership context that transformative service learning requires. Finding a balance between outcomes for students and for community members remains one of the major challenges of service learning. Achieving the one without compromising the other requires special attention to ways in which community members are empowered to participate fully throughout the process of planning, implementation, evaluation and revision of service learning modules.

## 2.1 Service learning in the USA and South Africa: a perpetual balancing act

It is contested in the literature (*cf* Hall's statement above) that community engagement has become a deeply embedded core function of higher education institutions, or rather a "core value" of higher education as Gibbons (2006) suggests it should. As a curricular form of community engagement, service learning has been labelled as being held "terminally captive by legacies of the past" (Mahlomaholo & Matobako 2003: 203) based on data collected at CUT during the early CHESP years. According to Mahlomaholo & Matobako, the data showed a tendency for service learning to be practised at the level of charity, or in some instances as projects, but not yet as genuine commitment to civic and community engagement. It is worth noting that they concluded by pointing out that the challenge remained to "involve communities

themselves in the CSL processes, have them own them and also manage them” (Mahlomaholo & Matobako 2003: 214-5).

In both South Africa and the USA, where service learning originated, research has focused mostly on issues related to student learning outcomes, concerns of academic staff and the university (Cruz & Giles 2000: 30, Erasmus 2005: 13). Over time researchers increasingly asked, “Where is the community in service learning?” (Cruz & Giles 2000: 31). Consequently, they began to highlight this issue. In South Africa, in particular, some authors bemoaned the fact that the voice of the community was almost completely absent from service learning research. They subsequently became involved in attempts to change the situation (Laattoe 2007: 23, Nduna 2007: 69, Alperstein 2007). At the universities where the present authors work, it is generally assumed that student placements in communities benefit those communities, but no longitudinal impact study that would provide substantive evidence has been done thus far.

A decade ago Cruz & Giles (2000: 2) contended that even if the community perspective is studied, it is mostly in relation to students (level of satisfaction with the students). They also stated that the few studies that had addressed community outcomes “reported satisfaction with student participants, a sense that service learning provides a useful service in communities, and the perception that service learning enhanced community-university relationships” (Cruz & Giles 2000: 2). Half a decade ago, in an introduction to a volume of articles on service learning and the South African research agenda (Bingle & Erasmus 2005), it was mentioned that the scope for enquiry in the field of service learning is especially exciting in view of the fact that so little material relevant to the South African situation itself has been published. As far as research directed at the outcomes of service learning is concerned, Erasmus (2005: 17) suggested that, among other topics, impact studies to establish the longer term outcomes of the various forms of engagement should be considered for collaborative studies in subsequent South African research.

In a developing country such as South Africa, with its contradictions and disparities, it makes sense to put particular emphasis on meeting the felt needs (Bhattacharyya 2004) identified by

community members as a primary concern of service learning initiatives.<sup>4</sup> When discussing the role of service learning in community development, however, it is clearly imperative to consider the sustainability of such involvement and its longer term effects (Fourie 2003: 32). In undertaking a study about the sustainability of gained skills and knowledge in sewing technology Van Schalkwyk (2009) specifically heeded the above-mentioned calls.

Since the publication of *Education white paper 3* (DoE 1997), South African higher education institutions have explored new models for community engagement that improve their capacity to fulfil their institutional missions and create opportunities to contribute to the transformation of South African society. Implementing and institutionalising service learning are some of the most important activities higher education institutions undertake to improve community engagement. When understood and applied correctly, community engagement and service learning constitute serious academic work that enhances the most fundamental educational purpose: building knowledge (HEQC/JET 2006: ix).

In addition to finding meaningful, constructive ways to conceptualise and theorise community engagement and service learning in terms of various forms of scholarship, much attention has been devoted to defining the concept of service learning. Although broad consensus has been reached that the service provided by students must be relevant and meaningful to the community, its primary concern still tends to gravitate towards achieving specific learning outcomes for students. This article defines and conceptualises service learning as a balancing act between outcomes for both students and communities.

4 In addition, their “unfelt needs”, in the form of inhibiting distorted assumptions about themselves, should also be addressed, as Van der Merwe & Albertyn (2009: 165) point out.

## 2.2 Defining, conceptualising and theorising service learning

There are numerous definitions of service learning in the literature. One that is commonly cited (Bringle & Hatcher 2000: 273) defines the activity of service learning as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community goals, and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. This definition shows that the student experience is the primary vantage point for this form of engagement, and the concern of the majority of lecturers who venture into this field is how effectively their students can learn and develop. However, they soon realise that the other participants must be taken into account in order to ensure that the experience is equally valuable and meaningful to them. In addition, theoretical foundations in experiential learning and community-based education have to be taken into account, adding to perceived (and indeed real) complexities.

The context of a developing country adds to sensitivities in respect of underlying power issues and contradictions, in particular regarding concepts that include the term “community”. Erasmus (2005: 5-6), consonant with several other practitioners working in the field, makes some suggestions as to how the requisite philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of service learning could be accounted for. She states that it requires, *inter alia*, joint acquisition of competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) within a collaborative partnership between the higher education institution, the service sector and local communities; reciprocal teaching and learning among all the participants; open, inclusive systems of knowledge generation in an application context; the inclusion of local and indigenous knowledge of communities, and prior and experiential knowledge of all the participants. All of the above points to a perpetual balancing act. However, shying away from such challenges is not an option, considering the challenges still facing South Africa.

It is clear that service learning engagements should contribute to students developing into reflective, responsible citizens (in relation to local, national and global communities), and address pertinent community challenges. In order to avoid becoming exploitative enterprises service learning initiatives must thus add noticeable (preferably measurable) value to the lives of local community members. What is more important in this endeavour is that community members should experience the power of their own contribution to the knowledge society by influencing the curricula of academic programmes and appreciating their role as co-educators of students. This is dictated by the defining principle of reciprocal teaching and learning mentioned earlier.

In addition, the value of service learning for all participants lies in its location in the real, “messy” world<sup>5</sup> where those involved “proceed from doubt to the resolution of doubt, to the generation of doubt”. With reference to Dewey’s learning theory, Schon (1995: 29) explains that “doubt lies not in the mind but in the situation”. Aspects of Dewey’s educational and social philosophy are often identified as being relevant to the development of a theory of service learning. For the African context Hatcher & Erasmus (2008) also explored the educational ideals of Julius Nyerere – in juxtaposition with those of Dewey – as a grounding for organic, rhizomatic growth for service learning in the African continent.

Based on one of Dewey’s themes, namely The Great Community, Eylar & Giles (1994: 83) suggest the following questions to contribute to a theory of service learning:

- Does participation in service learning lead to a valuing of community?
- Does it promote the creation of community?
- Will involvement in community-focused service learning lead to lifelong community development?

5 Also referred to as a Mode 2 society in which the boundaries between sectors, institutions and academic disciplines have to become permeable and blurred due to uncertainty and the complexity of challenges that arise, cf Gibbons 2006, Erasmus 2007.

These questions point to areas for further thinking, especially in view of linking long-term service learning outcomes for the community to sustainable community development, as argued by Fourie (2003: 33-5). Cruz & Giles (2000: 27) urge the research community to “overcome the obstacles of definition, methodology, and complexity in studying service learning’s effects on the community.”

### 2.3 Partnerships and participation in service learning

The idea of working in partnerships is not new. However, over the past decades many South African universities have become notorious for what some describe as an ivory-tower mentality (Fourie 2003), rather competing for research and/or world-class status than deeply investing in collaborative efforts to search for solutions to the challenges of their immediate environs. The fact remains that the development of responsive partnerships for service learning is regarded as fundamental to its success. Building trusting, respectful relationships with external stakeholders enables the university to realise its goals of relevant teaching, learning and research, and simultaneously enables community organisations to access university resources and acquire expertise in support of their activities (Gelmon *et al* 1998: 98).

Bringle & Hatcher (2000: 273) argue that “higher education must build important collaborative partnerships, improve all forms of scholarship, nurture the support of stakeholders, and contribute to the common good”. In a recent contribution to the ongoing deliberations about the nature of campus-community collaborations, Bringle *et al* (2009: 3) point out that they refer to a relationship as a partnership “if the interactions possess three particular qualities: closeness, equity, and integrity”. Their relationships’ continuum and the E-T-T model of relationship outcomes (exploitive, transactional and transformative) offer invaluable insight into the nature and ideal practice of “important collaborative partnerships” (Bringle *et al* 2009: 4-7).

Within the CHESP context Lazarus (2001: 8) describes a partnership as the “vehicle for engagement” and notes that through a partnership, one is confronted with the different realities and forms

of knowledge each partner brings to the relationship, and that new realities and new forms of knowledge may consequently emerge. In our opinion it is this “risqué” epistemological shift that deters many academics from venturing out of the safety and positions of power within their disciplinary boundaries. In a study in which she describes service learning students as “boundary workers” McMillan (2009) explains how these students make the boundaries between sectors of society more permeable and conducive to collaborative efforts. In our opinion, one should also regard community participants, in their encounters with students, as boundary workers and remember to extend the current focus on student learning to include a deeper theoretical understanding of emancipatory, transformative learning strategies for community members (*cf* Van der Merwe & Albertyn 2010, for concise guidelines in this regard).

In a South African publication that was developed as a resource for integrating service learning in the curriculum of students (commissioned through the CHESP initiative), Bender *et al* (2006: 94-5) define service learning partnerships as “formal, long-term relationships agreed to by communities, universities and service organisations to achieve common outcomes”. They contend that an implicit value of partnerships is “the commitment to social transformation and redistribution through building and sharing of capacity” (Bender *et al* 2006: 93). As signified by its name (Community – Higher Education – Service Partnerships), the CHESP initiative identified (a minimum of) three partners to form a tripartite partnership: the community, the higher education institution, and a service sector partner. Specifically designed for the South African context, such tripartite partnerships were described as having a threefold purpose within the CHESP grant strategy (JET 2002: 2): contributing towards the empowerment and development of local communities; making higher education policy and practice more relevant and responsive to community needs, and enhancing service delivery to participating communities.

For service learning collaboration to be effective the partnership should be viewed as a dynamic, joint creation in which all those involved help to create knowledge, share power, mix personal and

institutional interests, and create meaning. Nduna (2007: 70) adds that higher education, in partnership with communities and service sector partners as well as international partners, can play a major role in community development, provided that all relevant stakeholders are involved in the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of service learning. This would require considerable commitment and effort from the academic staff member who is, in most instances, the primary driver of the process.

In the Narrative Report (required by the CHESP grant-making strategy) on the service learning module in Sewing Technology, Van Schalkwyk (2004: 10) mentions that the triad partnership among the three stakeholders, namely the CUT (higher education institution), the NPO Lesedi la Setjhaba (acting as service sector partner) and the community (unemployed persons from Rocklands) was developed with a view to establishing a long-term, sustainable relationship with the community. Therefore the CUT implicitly agreed to take up its responsibility of collaborating with the local community in order to improve society. What follows is a concise overview of the case study that was undertaken in order to gauge the outcomes of these processes, mainly from the perspective of community participants.

### 3. Community outcomes of the module in Sewing Technology

During 2003 and 2004 the Department of Clothing and Fashion at the CUT utilised the CHESP grant as a vehicle to initiate and facilitate the development of a triad partnership for the implementation of service learning in the curriculum of the learning programme Clothing. The introduction of a service learning module in Sewing Technology fitted into the community empowerment objectives of the CHESP Grant Strategy, and could potentially teach much-needed sewing skills to members of communities experiencing the pervasive challenges of unemployment and poverty.

### 3.1 The CHESP logic model for service learning module development

The Grant Strategy required that representatives of the three partners make use of the CHESP Logic Model (a framework for programme planning and evaluation) introduced by the Stellenbosch-based Evaluation Research Agency (ERA) to develop the service learning modules to be funded. In the Logic Model the following eight programme components were to be determined for the students, community, and service sector: cause; problem; programme activities; immediate outcomes; indicators; outcome measures; intermediate outcomes, and impact/long-term outcomes. ERA, which was commissioned by JET to undertake the monitoring and evaluation for the entire initiative, designed an elaborate programme evaluation system with a number of instruments, mainly focusing on short-term outcomes for students and community members (Mouton & Wildschut 2005). A benefit of the ERA intervention is that it created an awareness of participatory, improvement-oriented quality management in many of the academic staff who were involved.

At the time when the Department of Clothing and Fashion and the manager of the NPO Lesedi la Setjhaba (on behalf of unemployed members of the Rocklands community) sat down to discuss the Logic Model conceptualisation of the Sewing Technology module, it was envisaged that the provincial Department of Labour would come on board as service sector partner. This did not materialise and the initial contact person ascribed it to the fact that the Department was understaffed.<sup>6</sup> As often happens when a public sector stakeholder is not in a position to join forces, the NPO partner takes on the role of service partner and the community members gradually begin to represent themselves as direct beneficiaries, as it were, often with increasing agency and voice, as will be demonstrated below.

6 In our experience with the development of several modules at our institutions, securing the commitment of government officials does not often succeed. A general lack of capacity, understaffing and complex procedures required by the public sector all serve as confounding factors in this regard.

This article provides only some information contained in the Logic Model components for the three groups of participants. The student “problem” was described as being two-fold: students did not have the ability to apply theoretical knowledge, and there was limited student involvement in the community. One of the long-term outcomes for students was: “Graduate students that are better equipped for the work force”.<sup>7</sup>

For the community both the cause and the problem related directly to the widespread unemployment and poverty experienced in Rocklands. As long-term outcomes, which were evaluated in this study, it was stated that the target community would be empowered with improved living standards and a higher quality of life in the long run. For Lesedi la Setjhaba evidence of success would be found in reported improved sewing skills practices, higher levels of motivation, better communication, innovation, and procurement and maintenance of employees. In an attempt to gauge the progress made regarding some of the above the following research was conducted.

### 3.2 Research design and methodology

The evaluation research reported in this article was designed as an empirical mixed-method case study, in which community members were invited to share their perspectives on and opinions of the long-term outcomes of the service learning module for them. The process thus required opening up the knowledge construction process within the participatory worldview that is needed for joint meaning-making. The purpose was to listen to the voices of community members in order to find authentic ways of improving the module mainly with regard to outcomes determined for them (but initially not by them).

During 2009 the first author spent an extended period of time at the community centre where Lesedi la Setjhaba is located and interacted with the community members from Rocklands who participated in the study. The ideal was that all 21 community members

7 Some might even become competent employees in the Department of Labour in future.

who had participated in the service learning activities from 2005 until 2007 would be included in the research, but for various practical reasons<sup>8</sup> only 12 participants could be traced. The sampling method can therefore be typified as non-probability and convenience sampling (Leedy & Ormrod 2005: 206).

The following research questions were identified for purposes of conducting the investigation into the sustainability of the community outcomes of the service learning module in Sewing Technology that has been offered by the CUT since 2004. To what extent were the pre-determined long-term outcomes for community members achieved? What factors played a role in the achievement versus non-achievement of these outcomes? In view of these, how could the module be adapted in order to improve the achievement of these outcomes for community members?

A semi-structured interview schedule for community members was developed, in consultation with the manager of Lesedi la Setjhaba, in order to evaluate the outcomes and to search for answers to the research questions. These interviews were conducted individually, and the researcher collected and analysed the quantitative and qualitative responses. From the findings specific deductions could be made regarding the factors that influenced the failure/success of the service learning module in Sewing Technology. Additional data was collected through participatory observation, since the participants had the opportunity to practically demonstrate the sewing skills they had acquired and retained after a period of 12 to 36 months since their training. The retention levels of sewing skills acquired through the service learning were individually observed and assessed by the researcher according to a rubric. All the data was carefully documented and analysed using the constant comparative method of data analysis described by Maykut & Morehouse (2005: 127).

8 Several did not have fixed addresses, some cellular telephone numbers no longer existed, and some might have moved.

### 3.3 Findings and recommendations

The first section of the interview schedule requested demographic information of the community members, who were all female. The profile showed that five (42%) of the participants were Sesotho-speaking, while the other seven (58%) had Setswana as their home language. The participants varied in age from the 15-20-year age group to the 41-45-year age group, with the majority of five (42%) in the age group 21-25 years. With regard to education institutions attended, six (50%) had completed secondary school, while four (34%) had attended a college. Regarding the employment status of the participants, six (50%) were unemployed, and one (8%) was self-employed. Three (26%) of the community members were full-time wage earners, while two (16%) held so-called "piece jobs". Ten (84%) of the community members had access to a sewing machine, most of whom at Lesedi la Setjhaba (66%), while two (16%) had no such access whatsoever. Seven (58%) of the participants who could be traced had taken part in the service learning activities at Lesedi la Setjhaba during 2005, while two (16%) had participated in 2006. Only three (26%) had taken part in the service learning activities during 2007.

Selected findings from the individual interviews with and skills test for community members are reported below, according to the sequence of the research questions.

The extent to which the pre-determined long-term outcomes for community members were achieved revealed that regarding their empowerment through improved skills and knowledge community members were very positive. In response to interview questions as to whether and how their knowledge of and skills in sewing had increased as a result of the service learning skills-transfer exercise, they all indicated definite improvements and retention thereof. Some examples are: "I could only sew with my hand, now I can sew with a machine."; "I learned how to lay out a pattern."; "I learned to do embroidery work.", and "I knew nothing about sewing, now I can sew a skirt."

On assessing the sewing skills acquired by the participants, varying levels of retention were found. A mean of seven (58%) of the participants were able to master the use of the sewing machine sufficiently after a period of 12 to 36 months of their training. The basic sewing skills had been sufficiently mastered by six (50%) of the participants. Finally, the results from the assessment of the gained sewing skills showed that, although the majority of the participants had some form of access to a sewing machine, it appeared that only 50% of them could achieve the pre-determined long-term outcomes in respect of skills transfer. This indicates that follow-up interventions would be important for further honing of skills, which might be in the form of bringing other NPOs involved in sewing projects into the partnership.

The long-term outcome of achieving better living standards could not be determined accurately during the course of the study. In the context of a developing country such as South Africa much more time and extensive longitudinal research are needed to determine whether service learning activities do indeed have such positive effects. The outcomes of empowerment and higher quality of life might be more readily assessed positively in terms of several participants reporting improved confidence when it came to being creative and endeavouring to develop a wider range of skills (“I want to learn to make cushions and curtains”).

In identifying the factors that played a role in the achievement versus non-achievement of outcomes, one factor was found to be the level of understanding of the purpose of service learning activities. The majority (10) of the participants indicated that the students had taught them how to thread a sewing machine and how to sew. One noted that the students had come there to teach her sewing skills so that she could become self-employed. Another community member described her understanding of the purpose of service learning activities as follows: “Students giving back to the community; teach less fortunate community members to do something for themselves.” It can thus be deduced that the participants showed different levels of understanding, ranging from mere skills transfer to the development of a sense of social responsibility in students.

The opinions of participants regarding positive as well as negative effects of the service learning activities revealed that they regarded their interaction with the CUT students in a very positive way. Several participants indicated that they had enjoyed the presence of the students and communicating with them (“I enjoy to communicate with the students”). Some of the most positive effects experienced by the participants were related to their successful mastering of the skills of threading a sewing machine and stitching in a straight line. One added “At home I did nothing, now when I go home, I can sew.”; “Even though I am unemployed, I got the chance to learn how to work on a sewing machine.” Several participants experienced the students as facilitators with a lot of patience, which was much appreciated. It can be assumed that these positive effects played a role in the achievement of the longer term outcomes of being empowered through mastering new skills and experiencing a better quality of life through being respected as potential masters of their own destiny.

The community members experienced some negative effects during the implementation of the service learning module. Two of the participants complained about poor communication between them and the students (“Student cannot communicate with me on my level”), while two participants had found their student facilitators to be impatient at times (“Impatience from student when I forgot a certain skill”; “Sometimes the student get irritable and shout at me”). In this instance, the authors concur with Nduna (2007: 74) that students should be made aware of cultural and social differences involved in order to adopt relevant instruction strategies when dealing with adult learners in the community.

Community members’ general opinions on their interaction with the students yielded mainly positive responses such as: “The students must keep coming to Lesedi, they do a lot for the community”, and “I like the courage of the students to teach other people who know nothing of sewing.” Only one participant mentioned that the students also learned from them. This shows that the community members were not aware of their intended role as co-teachers of the students. The principle of “reciprocal teaching and learning”

mentioned earlier was not adequately discussed with them and they assumed the predominant role of recipients of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Identification of how the module could be adapted to improve the achievement of long-term outcomes for community members revealed that their suggestions were more related to practical sewing skills than to better living standards and a higher quality of life. Those who were self-employed and who had successfully mastered the sewing skills had a need for more advanced sewing projects (“I want to learn to bead and do embroidery work”). Another suggestion was that students should teach them to make things with their hands, because most did not have a sewing machine at home. This is further evidence that these community members were mainly focusing on their immediate felt needs and had not been made aware in the partnership formation stage that longer term empowerment-related outcomes were also envisaged for them. It is clearly vital to include them right from the conceptualisation stage of an intervention.

In addition to these views of community members, the authors, who regularly work together in the local service learning and community context, also reflected on the nature of the partnerships in which the module was embedded. This partnership context was supposed to provide an enabling environment for the achievement of community outcomes. This was true to a limited extent only. The authors realised that more partners should become involved in order to strengthen the collaborative network within which this NPO functions. Other relevant NPOs and academic departments should be invited to add to capacity-building and knowledge-building endeavours, and the provincial Department of Labour should again be approached to join forces in terms of the National Skills Development Plan for the country.

9 This could be labelled a “distorted assumption”, as pointed out by Van der Mewe & Albertyn (2009: 152) with reference to Mezirow’s theory of transformative adult learning.

#### 4. Recommendations and conclusion

It has become evident that more active participation of community members would enable them to use their agency in determining and achieving the long-term outcomes of service learning for themselves. The following guidelines are suggested for the implementation of a service learning module in the context of a developing country.

- Community members should be better informed of the many purposes of service learning and should be able to appreciate the important role they play as co-teachers of the students – as they are being “served” by students, the community members also provide a unique service to the higher education institution and the students.
- More regular communication among the members of the partnership should take place to ensure that the voices of the community will be heard in setting goals for the development and ongoing improvement of the module.
- There should be clear communication to encourage all participants to allow for greater flexibility in module development. It should therefore lead to deeper levels of responsiveness to community challenges.
- To enhance community development outcomes, participatory approaches to the monitoring and evaluation of the achievement of the long-term outcomes for the community members should be followed.
- The same attention paid to designing transformative, reflective learning experiences for service learning students should be paid to ensuring that community members experience their participation as empowering and emancipatory.
- All efforts should be made to extend the partnership network for the module on an ongoing basis: all participants should work at involving more NPOs, other university departments and government stakeholders.

- There should be a specific focus on enhancing and strengthening the role of the NPO service sector partner (in this instance Lesedi la Setjhaba) with regard to the building of capacity in the community-based organisation, broader community empowerment and thus – in the long term – more sustainable community development.

The role that service learning, as an effective form of higher education community engagement, will play in future depends on ongoing collaborative research that enables community participants to make their voices heard regarding improvement of service learning implementation as viewed from their perspective. This will clearly require that the current focus on student learning that prevails in the field should be extended to include a deeper understanding of emancipatory teaching approaches and transformative learning for community members (Van der Merwe & Albertyn 2010). In order for South African universities to make a meaningful impact on their immediate environs, as Mokhele (2010) suggests, they will have to ensure that the voices of local communities become clearly audible through potentially robust, respectful forms of engagement such as service learning.

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