

# DEEPENING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP THROUGH ARTS-BASED APPROACHES TO EXPERIENTIAL SERVICE LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

Inspired by models of community engagement initiated in North-American universities, the Visual Arts Department of the University of Johannesburg (UJ), together with the community-based organisation Tshulu Trust, developed an experimental service learning course aimed at evolving an approach to community engagement appropriate to the South African context. This article assesses the first iteration of this visual arts-based service learning intervention specifically with regard to the quality and content of student learning achieved. The results suggest that the methods and ethical-political approach of the community engagement movement significantly enhance the quality of student learning across the domains of academic enhancement, civic learning and personal growth. Furthermore, visual tools such as Photovoice, relationship-building tools such as Appreciative Enquiry and guided reflection that aims to describe, examine and articulate learning, could be adapted to enhance and deepen the learning of other student groups that regularly spend time in the same community.

**Keywords:** arts-based methods, civic learning, community engagement, cultural immersion, participatory action research

## INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Service-learning, a form of experiential education, is a collaborative teaching and learning strategy designed to promote academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement. Students render meaningful service in community settings that provide experiences related to academic material. Through guided reflection, students examine their experiences critically, thus enhancing the quality of both their learning and their service. (Ash & Clayton 2004: 139)

In his report entitled 'University Education for Community Change', Andrew Mott of the Ford Foundation's Community Learning Project argues cogently for the transformation of higher education in the United States of America (US). He asks (Mott 2005: 15): 'If poverty, race and community are such central issues for our society, why don't institutions of higher education develop programs to educate people for careers as leaders and supporters of community change efforts?' Mott proposes that university-based programmes can constitute a vital platform for the development of young leaders committed to positive community change, provided the curricula are specifically shaped to this purpose. While nascent community-change leaders can hone the capacities they need 'through experience, trial and error', he argues that 'they will develop far more quickly if they have an opportunity to learn through a combination of structured learning opportunities, practice and critical reflection' (ibid: 16). Furthermore, Mott (ibid.) continues, such curricula 'must involve practitioners as well as academics in teaching so they can offer the combination of knowledge, skills, and vision which are needed to have an impact on the fundamental issues which face our societies'.

In her article 'Reinserting the "Public Good" into Higher Education Transformation', Mala Singh (2001: 18) offers a similar assessment of challenges and opportunities in South Africa: 'Making social justice issues explicit and real within the notions of higher education responsiveness and accountability is likely to prove enormously difficult, if not impossible. The task requires not only tenacious commitment but also clarity of conception about what is required, and mobilisation of different role players around it.' An important contribution to such mobilisation in South Africa is the recent establishment by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of a research field called the Community Engagement Programme (CEP). The opening up of this new field has made it possible for the authors of this article to take up the challenge and attempt to show that achieving the goals that Singh outlines is possible. Bringing together role players from the higher education and civil society sectors, the authors formed a partnership to undertake a three-year NRF-funded research project to evolve an effective, context-specific model of community engagement in the domain of arts-based approaches for community development. In this initiative the higher education partner organisation is UJ's Visual Arts Department, and the community partner is Tshulu Trust, a not-for-profit organisation based in HaMakuya, north-eastern Limpopo Province ([www.tshulutrust.org](http://www.tshulutrust.org)).

In designing this intervention the authors have been inspired and motivated by the ideals and successes of the civic engagement movement in the US (Boyer 1996; London 2003), but are also sobered by the challenges that this movement has faced in achieving substantive transformative change in the United States' higher education sector (Campus Compact 2000; Hartley 2009; Hartley, Saltmarsh & Clayton 2010). Most case studies reveal a tension between the importance of the goal and the difficulty of achieving it in practice, as exemplified by the analyses by Mott and Singh. For this reason the authors' research design is based on the iterative learning cycles of action research. The authors do not expect the experimental curricular design to be ideal in the first year. The research entails the design, implementation and assessment of a service learning course introduced into the fourth year of the Visual Arts Bachelor of Technology curriculum at UJ. Each year, for three years, the authors plan to follow Kurt Lewin's 'action research spiral' of problem identification, action, reflection and evaluation, which leads to revised problem identification and modified action (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948).

The foundational questions of this research are threefold: First, how can the visual arts contribute to the development and empowerment of a rural community in a South African national poverty node? Specifically, how may arts students and lecturers contribute meaningfully through active engagement within a tertiary education service learning course? Second, what learning opportunities are made available to visual arts students through such community-based service learning, and how might this change their understanding and practice as artists and democratic citizens? Thirdly, what are the most effective methodological tools both to facilitate effective learning and to ensure a positive impact in the community, and how may such efficacy and impact be monitored and assessed?

This article addresses one small part of the larger enquiry: it is an analysis of the impact on student learning of the first iteration of visual arts-based service learning that occurred in HaMakuya in March 2011, and an evaluation of the efficacy of the methodological tools used. It addresses the second and third foundational questions underpinning the long-term project. The first foundational enquiry, which focuses on the impact on the community of HaMakuya and the host organisation Tshulu Trust, will be addressed in a separate assessment. This reflection and analysis serve as part of the project's first action research cycle, and provide the basis on which the design and implementation of the curriculum will be modified for its second iteration.

## THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS

The primary agenda of the civic engagement movement is to strengthen the relationship between higher education and wider society through a greater commitment to social responsibility. A foundational goal within the broader agenda is to facilitate substantive understanding of social problems amongst students, and to cultivate their civic and

leadership skills such that they develop the desire and capacity to become agents for positive social change.

The main motivation for introducing community engagement into the curriculum for fourth-year visual arts students, therefore, is for its potential as a transformative process. Transformation has the potential to manifest in a number of ways: it could arise 1) in students' artwork, affecting the interpretations and provocations they offer to the public in their praxis as visual artists; 2) through providing students with the methodological tools and political motivation to address social problems as arts activists; or 3) through instilling a deeper understanding of the complexities and contradictions of South African society, defined as it is by its position as one of the most unequal countries in the world.

In this article the authors aim to reveal the ways in which students who take the course in community engagement benefit from an expanded knowledge base compared to other visual arts students. For instance, the students develop particular analytical capacities, practical skills and methodological tools through experiential learning and participatory action approaches to community service. The pedagogical approach also offers students an enhanced opportunity to develop cognitive aptitudes such as critical thinking, decision-making skills and the ability to understand empathetically the perspectives of people with a very different life experience and outlook. The experience and capacities gained through this course open up to students an additional set of career options relating to community-based arts, arts for development, and the use of visual arts in advocacy and political activism. In sum, the course offers students a structured learning opportunity to experience a cultural context that is different from their own, to practise visual art and pass on art-making skills in this context, to contribute positively to a disadvantaged community and to receive generous hospitality and goodwill in return, and to reflect critically on their positionality in South African society with regard to their personal identities and their roles as artists.

## SETTING THE SCENE: PREPARING TO ENGAGE AND ACT WITH UNDERSTANDING

Preparations for the service learning field trip to HaMakuya consisted of seven weeks of seminars that provided the theoretical and methodological context for the course. Situated within the broad challenge of using visual art to contribute to positive social change in South Africa (Berman 2009), the 'Cultural Action for Change Programme' provided a foundational case study (Antonopolou, Berman & Sellschop 2008). Cultural Action for Change was a five-year Aids Action programme based at UJ and funded by the Ford Foundation. It aimed to assess sustainability and address the impact of HIV within Phumani Paper craft enterprises, a government-funded poverty alleviation programme that established papermaking-by-hand and craft enterprises across South Africa. The research team consisted of academics, artists and students who collaborated to offer arts-based, multi-disciplinary community interventions. Participatory Action

Research (PAR) was the approach used because of its emphasis on seeking to enhance the quality of life of the participants. The goal of the Aids Action intervention was to provide support to, and increase the agency of, participants of the Phumani Paper craft enterprises affected by the HIV pandemic (Berman 2011).

Methodologically, the UJ course focused on the domain of PAR, within which the commonalities and differences between the following approaches were addressed: experiential learning, service learning, and community-based research and engagement. The specific methodological tools introduced to facilitate effective community engagement were Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Hammond 1998) and Most Significant Change (MSC) (Davies & Dart 2005). AI is an approach to organisational change and community development that focuses on the positive, on what works, as opposed to what does not work. The results of an AI workshop are statements that identify the organisation or community's visions for the future, and determine how to do more of what works in order to reach identified goals (Hammond 1998:7). The MSC technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It facilitates the identification of positive and negative changes, and is particularly effective in engaging complex social change programmes with diverse and emergent outcomes (Davies & Dart 1998:7). While AI envisions the future and is most useful in the planning stage of an intervention, MSC contributes best to monitoring and evaluation during the programme management cycle.

The three visual methodological tools for social change introduced were Photovoice, Paper Prayers and collaborative mural-making. Photovoice uses photographs made by individuals in the community to stimulate the expression of narratives about their lives (Wang & Buris 1997). Paper Prayers, introduced as a nationwide-campaign for HIV/Aids awareness by Artist Proof Studio in 1998, uses simple print-making techniques to encourage individuals to express their emotions about loss and illness. Paper Prayers workshops have proven to be an effective method of communicating about HIV/Aids awareness, and sexual practice and behaviour change using artistic methods (Berman & Allen 2009). Mural-making lends itself to democratised art practice because it is relatively easy to facilitate community participation. Working together with artists, community members can identify an advocacy message and present it creatively to a wider audience. The process of making a mural has the potential to be transformative, not only for the participants but also for other community members and passers-by who choose to engage. The public nature of mural-making extends the possibilities of inspiring potential social change agents.

The final set of methods engaged in the pre-field visit seminars provided the rationale and tools for critical reflection and evaluation (Goldbard 2006; Patton 2011). In action research assessment is part of the research process and therefore part of the toolkit students need to understand the methodology fully. Assessment is also fundamental to effective community engagement. As Katrina Norvell and Sherril Gelmon (2011: 265) assert: 'Engagement can be a transformative process. When entered into in a genuine way it can lead to change on the part of institutions, community partners,

students and faculty *because it requires* ongoing reflection and evaluation strategies designed for continuous improvement' (emphasis added). What is instructive about this formulation is that it underscores the fact that community engagement is not necessarily transformative in and of itself: transformation occurs as a result of ongoing reflection and evaluation in striving for the continuous improvement of the engagement. Norvell and Gelmon propose that assessment reveals the extent to which students are aware of their role as citizens with a voice, and of their responsibility to participate in community problem-solving; it can also demonstrate the extent to which they have mastered skills relating to decision making, critical thinking and conflict resolution.

Sarah Ash and Patti Clayton (2004: 139) have developed an assessment model for guided reflection and evaluation that can be adapted to any service-learning context. 'The ultimate goal of reflection in service-learning,' they assert, 'is to help students explore and express what they are learning through their service experiences so that both the learning and the service are enhanced'. This is best accomplished using critical thinking tools and rubrics that 'generate, deepen and document learning' (Ash and Clayton 2009). It was using Ash and Clayton's DEAL model (which entails Describing, Examining and Articulating Learning) (ibid: 41–43) that students were required to analyse the efficacy of the ways in which the community engagement and visual arts tools had been brought together during their week of community engagement. This constituted the most important deliverable of their course: a reflective essay on what they had learnt in the three primary categories of service learning, namely academic enhancement, civic learning and personal growth (ibid: 29).

## ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE IN HAMAKUYA

The group participating in the community engagement elective programme comprised the following: from UJ ten Visual Art BTech students, two Masters' students (from Fine Art and Sociology) and a sociology lecturer; an independent HIV/Aids facilitator; a Tshivenda-speaking artist (from Artist Proof Studio) who is familiar with visual arts methodologies and able to facilitate workshops in Tshivenda; and the two authors of this article, representing the university and community partners. The six white female BTech and Master's Visual Art students were middle class, while the three black male students were from financially less advantaged urban backgrounds. The middle class black female sociology postgraduate student had had a relatively privileged education. Only two students were familiar with a rural way of life: the artist from Artist Proof Studio, and a black male student who, although he had been schooled in Johannesburg, had spent a significant amount of time with family in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

The group embarked on an eight hour bus-ride from Johannesburg to the Venda chieftancy of HaMakuya, Mutale Municipality, in the north-eastern reach of Limpopo Province near the border with Zimbabwe and the Kruger National Park.

As part of the former homeland of Venda, HaMakuya suffered systematic under-development during the apartheid era, and is now recognised as a national poverty node.

The chieftaincy, 90 per cent of which overlaps with Ward 13 of Mutale Municipality, is approximately 800km<sup>2</sup> (40 km x 20 km) and includes 18 villages ranging in size from 20 to 400 households each. Basic infrastructure is still sorely lacking and service delivery is low: there is not a single paved road in the chieftancy, and water, available only from shared communal taps, is frequently unavailable. (At the time of writing, water was available one day a week.) There are two clinics, one police station, 13 primary schools and one secondary school. Unemployment is estimated at over 90 per cent and the only substantive source of cash income is government grants. Areas of development that have progressed well over the past ten years include the introduction of cellular communications technology and the roll-out of electricity to villages along the main arterial road. There are also significant improvements in primary school infrastructure and teaching, and in the quality of health provision at the clinic level.

Tshulu Trust (No.: IT 12/08) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to alleviate poverty and enhance local economic development by assisting HaMakuya community members to utilise their natural and cultural resources sustainably. Tshulu takes a nodal approach to achieving sustainable rural development in which a core anchor project is established that supports a variety of smaller initiatives. These micro-enterprises and cooperatives share costs and, together with the anchor project, create a node of growth that aims to stimulate the upgrading of infrastructure and the enhancement of capacity and markets. The Trust's anchor initiatives are Tshulu Camp and the HaMakuya Home-stay Programme, which are run from a central administration office in HaMakuya. The Trust also runs a Resource Centre that contributes to education with a particular focus on English language skills and environmental education.

The UJ arts for social change service-learning visit started with a day of lectures and workshops that provided an understanding of the social, economic, political, cultural and environmental context of life in HaMakuya. The students then gained an experiential understanding of living in HaMakuya by participating in home-stays – cultural exchange immersions in which groups of four students stay with a Tshulu-trained translator-guide in a village homestead for two days and nights, and participate in the daily activities of the household (Allen 2011).

In the service-learning component the students split into teams and contributed to a series of workshops and interventions with different community partners over a five-day period. The print-making tool Paper Prayers was used to consolidate learning in two HIV/Aids awareness events conducted in collaboration with Makuya Clinic (for the HIV/Aids support group, and for home-based carers), and in one primary school and two secondary school workshops. Collaborative mural-painting took place in two schools in which the students worked with groups of learners to create murals that celebrated the learners' dreams and aspirations towards a better future. Photovoice was used during the home-stays and also in a series of workshops run in collaboration with social workers to facilitate better understanding between foster parents and foster children.

## LEARNING FROM SERVICE: STUDENT REFLECTIONS

The students' reflective essays, in which they assessed and analysed what they had learnt with regard to the three primary categories of service learning, demonstrated a depth and complexity of understanding and self-awareness significantly more advanced than that displayed by any other university group that has participated in the HaMakuya home-stay programme thus far.

On a personal level a number of students felt respect and admiration for the way in which Venda people manage under such challenging living conditions, and were overwhelmed by their hosts' generosity against a backdrop of considerable material deprivation. Recognition of the conveniences and comforts that they had previously taken for granted at home was a recurring theme, as was an acknowledgement of the learning opportunities inherent in the process of defamiliarisation that being taken out of one's comfort zone offers. The students demonstrated strong self-reflexive awareness as they related how they learnt to deal with various physical, emotional and psychological discomforts, and showed admirable maturity in their discussions of the personal learning that had occurred as the context revealed and challenged aspects of their own characters. An attribute that differentiated the reflections of this cohort from that of most other visiting students was a strong awareness of the group dynamics between students, of how these impact on the experience of visitors and hosts, and of the importance of making a conscious effort to achieve effective teamwork and group cooperation.

One of the most important advances that many students made academically, concerns a recognition of the importance of critical thinking: they were forced to reassess a number of intellectual assumptions that they had held previously in an unexamined way. These ranged from having to engage with very different views on gender relations and animal rights, and entailed the destabilisation of conceptions of identity and the de-romanticisation of notions of idyllic rural life. A second area in which significant academic enhancement was achieved was in methodology. The students repeatedly acknowledged the value of experiential learning, particularly the depth and complexity of understanding that cannot be achieved through theoretical insight derived from lectures or literature on the subject. They also recognised the value of visual arts tools, particularly the importance and usefulness of visual communication across language and cultural barriers.

The domains of academic, personal and civic learning came together most directly in questions relating to identity and positionality, and the responsibility that comes with privilege in an unequal society. The students' interest in forming good relationships with community members, and their wish to make a positive impact through their workshops, revealed a complex nexus of power dynamics, ethics and the impact of attitudes and assumptions on collaboration efforts. As they engaged the injustice of HaMakuya's underdevelopment and started to think about what could be done to address the situation, the students demonstrated the understanding, will and capacity to become agents for social change.



## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS: IMPACTS, INSIGHTS AND LEADS

Apart from the ways in which the service learning course destabilised students' prior conceptions and motivated them to become more active citizens, the experience also influenced them in other ways, most particularly in their practice as visual artists. The body of work produced by a fourth-year art student is expected to interrogate an important issue from an examined personal perspective. The fact that their experience in HaMakuya surfaced directly in the final portfolios of five of the ten BTech students attests to the influence of this course on their education, and their evolution as artists.

One student, whose HaMakuya reflective essay focused on gender and the inability of two shy young local girls to find their voices, linked gender, personal transformation and empowerment in her art: her paintings express ambivalence about being a young Afrikaans woman transforming from a fixed identity; tension is expressed through the tendency to hold onto artefacts connected with her heritage.

Social and personal transformation was also the foundational concern for a black male student who built a shack for his final exhibition. The shack interrogated the dichotomous and contradictory spaces in which so many South Africans live through its conversion into a 'gallery' that exhibited emotive images of poverty and transformation.

In an exhibition titled 'disEngage' another student directly confronted the public with the challenge of social responsibility. Using the Freedom Charter she challenged viewers to engage with her works as a moral compass that demands personal involvement in the construction of one's world.

A student whose home-stay was dominated by distress at seeing the effects of poverty on animals constructed a 'pet-penthouse' for her exhibition in order to direct the viewer's gaze towards the exploitation of animals. She framed a portrait of a dying dog, taken during her home-stay, in the centre of her installation to act as a critical challenge to the viewer's responsibility to the environment.

Prior to his visit to HaMakuya another student had resisted the traditional obligations to his family deriving from his position as the eldest son because he felt alienated from the cultural rituals and practices of his traditional Zulu heritage. The connections he made during his home-stay enabled him to develop a more complex understanding of his father's culture, and to respect it without compromising his own identity as an urban, educated artist. In his art he decorates contemporary clothing such as school blazers and jackets with an 'obsessive and camp' use of 'bling' that references traditional artefacts, ritual and contemporary urban materialism. He performs his identity by dressing in this regalia and depicting himself as a leader, but on his own terms.

An unforeseen positive outcome of the art for social change intervention in HaMakuya was that the Venda artist from Artist Proof Studio, who initially was intimidated by the university students, developed greater confidence during the week and by the end was leading many of the training workshops. On his return to Artist Proof Studio he began taking on a leadership role. He became an assistant teacher, and

has since run a number of workshops with first-year students, applying methods learnt in HaMakuya. The transformation of this artist into a confident and empowered agent for social change confirms the potential inherent in the model of student–community engagement that this art for social change research project is testing.

Another particularly important impact was that the methodologies introduced in the service learning course were adopted and adapted by the Fine Arts Master's student for her dissertation on active citizenship (Hartwig 2011). She modified Ash and Clayton's critical reflection and evaluation model to the needs of service learning projects that she conducted with students at Artist Proof Studio. Each of the students had to plan their own community engagement project entailing the transfer of silkscreen skills as a way to address a social issue (environmental conservation or littering, for example). As her version of Ash and Clayton's model is modified to the needs of a visual arts service learning intervention, the authors plan to use it in future iterations of the UJ art for social change course in HaMakuya.

A further outcome of the UJ service learning course is that it offers insights for Tshulu Trust with regard to how the learning of other visiting student groups could be enhanced. In practice, though, some groups would be better placed than others to adopt such learning strategies: the various university courses they work within operate according to differing time constraints and degrees of flexibility with regard to content and methodology. A provocative outcome of this intervention is that the focus on service to the community ultimately resulted in deeper learning on the part of the students than is customarily achieved by groups whose primary aim is the students' education. The authors propose, however, that it is not the service learning goal (as opposed to the goals of cultural exchange or community-based research, for instance) that makes the difference. Rather, it is the methodological approach driven by the political and ethical motivations that characterise the service learning and community engagement domain more broadly that ultimately result in deeper, more substantive student learning. Arguably, then, it would be possible to adapt aspects of community engagement theory and methodology for non-service learning courses and achieve more substantive levels of student learning across the domains of academic enhancement, civic learning and personal growth.

There are a number of specific ways in which Tshulu Trust could facilitate deeper learning for other student groups based on the innovations introduced by the UJ art for social change course. For the most part this would be based on the adoption of particular methodological tools. The most important contribution could be the use of Photovoice as a mechanism to facilitate quicker and more substantial communication between host families and guests during home-stays. The focus on the hosts taking photographs, which are used as a catalyst for discussion, draws the interaction away from the challenge of communicating in words across a language barrier and into the domains of physical action and the visual. It would be relatively easy for Tshulu Trust to provide digital cameras and a printing service so that Photovoice could be integrated into the home-stay programme run for other student groups.

Not all visiting university groups engage Tshulu Trust's services beyond the facilitation of home-stays. However, for those that do request briefing and debriefing, it would probably be advantageous for Tshulu to start incorporating those methodological tools used in the art for social change course that improved the quality of the students' learning. For instance, the AI tool seemed to have a lasting impact on the students' awareness of group dynamics, and the importance of being self-aware and mindful of others (both other students and community members). As a result the students were also better able to understand and analyse the extent to which their experience had to do with what the student group brought with it, as opposed to being an exclusive result of their new context. Most important, however, is the framing of the experience provided by Ash and Clayton's (2004, 2009) model for guided reflection and evaluation. The analytical discipline required to describe, examine and articulate their learning from their home-stays significantly increased the depth and extent of understanding exhibited by the UJ students as compared to groups not required to go through this process of structured reflection and interpretation.

These successes notwithstanding, a number of areas were revealed as requiring improvement and will be addressed in the second cycle of the course. For example, it would be helpful to clarify the primary learning goals right at the start of the course, and to establish that reflection and assessment are part of the process, as opposed to an end product as is the case in most pedagogical approaches. Also, since the students' reflections on the impact of the workshops was not quite as strong as on the home-stays, more attention will be paid to the impact of the visual arts workshops in the next cycle. Furthermore, greater effort will go into choosing community partners and facilitating their active participation in the interventions, as well as ensuring that the selected partners are interested in reflection and assessment in order to improve future interventions. Also, it is probably advisable to reduce the number and scope of workshops, and reallocate time and resources to reflection and consolidation. To support such consolidation it would probably be productive to replace the HIV/Aids awareness facilitator with an expert who uses an arts-based approach to advocacy or therapy. Finally, while Photovoice proved to be a very effective tool, particularly in the home-stays, it was logistically demanding and expensive to use disposable cameras and film. In the next cycle fewer digital cameras will be deployed, along with a portable printer.

Overall the authors are encouraged by the results of the first iteration of this experimental service learning course, and look forward to the challenge of improving aspects of the implementation that did not work optimally, over the next two years. The first cycle enacted many of the positive attributes of university civic engagement cited by Mott (2005): it 1) introduced students to the field of social and community change; 2) linked research projects to technology transfer for community development; 3) deployed multi-disciplinary expertise; 4) was grounded in both theory and practice, and advanced both; 5) created substantive partnerships between individuals and organisations; 6) strengthened participatory processes designed to build on community assets; and 7)

strengthened students' ability and desire to lead community change efforts. The hope is that this project will stimulate further university-based efforts to prepare students to function as agents for positive social change, within the arts and beyond.

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