

CONCEPTUALISATION AND EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGED CITIZENSHIP AS CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION AND MUTUAL JOY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, higher education institutions globally and in South Africa have begun to focus more on the educational potential of community-university engagement. As a result, many institutions of higher learning have been reimagining and debating the terms used to describe the engagement between students, academic staff and their community partners. At Rhodes University in Makhanda, there has been an active change in terminology, with previous “volunteerism” programmes renamed “engaged citizenship” opportunities. This article’s authors are current staff members and previous students at Rhodes University, whose university experiences were shaped by their involvement in the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Division. Using an autoethnographic style, they reflect on their experiences as volunteers/engaged citizens. These stories and reflections serve to highlight how the term engaged citizenship better encapsulates the nature of the involvement of students who are actively involved in their communities: where these community engagement spaces provide mutual benefit and mutual joy, deep learning and platforms for individuals to direct their agency to socially just ends. Ultimately, these narratives aim to illustrate the deeply personal ways in which the practice of engaged citizenship has shaped the authors’ own growth and generated the holistic and transformative educational experience for which higher education institutions strive.

Keywords: engaged citizenship, critical consciousness, community, development

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, higher education institutions globally and in South Africa have been reimagining the terms used to describe community-university engagement. At Rhodes University in Makhanda, there has been an active change in terminology, with previous

“volunteerism” programmes renamed “engaged citizenship” opportunities. Shifts in definition often feel abstract or trivial. In this article, we employ the technique of autoethnography to illustrate what the transition from the term volunteer to engaged citizen means for individuals engaged in community building in the town of Makhanda in South Africa. Where volunteering carries connotations of individual sacrifice (and saviour complexes) or even “resume padding”, in both cases, emphasising the role of students, the term engaged citizenship implies mutually beneficial relationships, community partners and transformative education. Our personal stories as two engaged citizens – and Rhodes University staff and students – illustrate the potential of this change in terminology to reimagine the nature and purpose of community engagement in higher education institutions.

In this article, we discuss the relevant literature surrounding the terms “volunteerism” and “engaged citizenship” and how these ideas relate to Paulo Freire’s conception of critical consciousness (Freire 2018, 87). After that, we outline the choice of autoethnography as a methodology and discuss our location and positionality to preface the stories we choose to tell. Following this context, we investigate our experiences as volunteers/engaged citizens and later, as staff at the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Division.

These stories depict how the term “engaged citizenship” better encapsulates the nature of the involvement of students who are actively involved in their communities. The term engaged citizenship is a specific contribution to our understanding of community engagement as it disrupts dichotomies of agent/victim implicit in the term “volunteer” to instead portray the importance of an interconnected and mutual effort in the pursuit of just and sustainable community development. Spaces of engaged citizenship provide mutual benefit and mutual joy – what we define as the delight that arises from relationships that allow one to feel seen as part of a greater whole or community – alongside deep learning, and platforms for individuals to direct their agency to socially just ends. Ultimately, these narratives aim to illustrate the deeply personal ways in which the practice of engaged citizenship has shaped our growth and generated the holistic and transformative educational experience for which higher education institutions strive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Volunteering: Definitions, connotations, and misconceptions

Volunteering is an act of service conventionally associated with four characteristics: it is unpaid, willingly taken on, formal, and intended to help others (Paull et al. 2015, 50). In recent years, each but particularly the last of these characteristics in this definition has received critical

attention as there has been greater recognition of the mutually beneficial nature of partnerships between volunteers and their community partners (Driscoll 2008). This is especially true at universities where volunteering is a component of community engagement in higher education. Community engagement is a two-way process where universities and their partners work in mutually beneficial and sustainable partnerships (Shuib and Koo 2017). Therefore, communities *and* universities benefit from this partnership: higher education institutions enjoy enhanced visibility and reputation, more robust networking and most significantly, an enrichment of teaching, learning and research (Shuib and Koo 2017). Community engagement therefore holds promise for universities and communities, but this does not mean that these relationships are always easy, or can act as silver bullet solutions to societal ills. Often, partnerships suffer from inequalities of power (where universities may crowd out other community leaders) that impede collaboration (Dempsey 2010, 360).

These challenges indicate the importance of reflexivity and reflection in community engagement but do not in themselves negate its value, and the ways in which it may contribute to positive social change. Students who choose to volunteer expand their classroom, and this environment may better equip students with the skills associated with education for human development, such as critical thinking, collaboration, empathy, social responsibility and adaptability (Nussbaum 2006). This characterisation contests previous definitions that frame volunteering as helping others without expecting anything in return. Therefore, the definition of volunteering has been interrogated and revised to reflect those benefits that accrue to communities and volunteers themselves (Paull et al. 2015, 51).

Despite this shift, volunteering is often still associated with helping others and focuses on the individual rather than the underlying structures that cause community problems (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 231). The prevalence of outreach, charity-based and deficit models means that volunteering continues to be associated with “missionary expedition[s]”, where volunteers come to the aid of helpless (and often nameless) victims (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 232). For some, volunteering is negatively associated with criminality, as community service is often depicted as a punishment for criminal activity, especially in the popular media and films (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 232). Others cynically see volunteering activities merely as a means of “padding resumes” (Bode 2017, 24). This perception does not appear baseless as even some universities advertise community engagement programmes and activities as ways for students to bolster their CVs or resumes (University of Louisville 2022). Finally, the term “volunteering” in a university context emphasises the role of students (or faculty members) who choose to partake in these activities and fails to give equal consideration to the role of community partners in community development and learning.

Reconceptualising university volunteering as engaged citizenship

Therefore, it is necessary to revisit how we conceptualise volunteering and explore more appropriate terminology. Ideally, when people come together to solve social issues, they should consider not only the surface-level issues faced by individuals but the structural problems that need addressing (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 237). As put by Bickford and Reynolds (2002, 238), the question should not be “Why can’t this child read?” but “What causes illiteracy?”. Furthermore, we need terms that emphasise reciprocal relationships, as through these partnerships we can foster mutual empowerment, which can contribute to social justice and structural change in society (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 237). As we move away from harmful conceptions and disrupt the binary of “heroes” and “victims”, our terminology must also become more inclusive of the various actors involved in social change.

To make this shift, reframing volunteering as engaged citizenship holds promise. The concept of citizenship, traced back to Ancient Greece, generally describes the right of people to rule and participate in democratic structures¹ (Bellamy 2008, 29). It is associated with specific characteristics: public participation, autonomy, a commitment to social order (i.e., working within institutions to effect desirable change) and relationships with others in one’s nation (Dalton 2008, 79–80). This last characteristic draws from TH Marshall’s conception of social citizenship and illustrates that citizenship may include an “ethical and moral responsibility to others in the polity, and beyond” (Dalton 2008, 80).

Engaged citizenship takes this concept further: it focuses on citizens who share a commitment to engaging in their communities to “build stronger, healthier, and safer communities” (Zaff et al. 2010, 737). Engaged citizens feel connected to their community and are willing and able to work towards positive change in their community (Zaff et al. 2010, 737). These people are thus able to critically analyse society and address social issues and injustices. They work with others in reciprocal relationships to build stronger communities and societies (Billings and Terkla 2011). The concept of engaged citizenship repositions community service as an act of mutual empowerment, where university students and community partners are included and all stand to benefit.

Engaged citizenship and critical consciousness

Engaged citizenship is tied to Paulo Freire’s conception of critical consciousness. Freire defines critical consciousness as learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and take action against reality’s oppressive elements (Freire 2018, 35). Critical consciousness is, therefore, about developing a sense of social justice through an awareness of the self, others

and social issues (Clark-Taylor 2016, 37). It comprises four elements: a deeper understanding of self, a broader perspective of others, an awareness of social issues, and seeing oneself as able to work towards social justice (Clark-Taylor 2016, 14). Key to critical consciousness is the idea that oppression is not just personal but structural and that working towards social justice is transformational, not only for those oppressed by the status quo but for all.

Freire (2018, 87) argues that the development of critical consciousness occurs through praxis and dialogue where people come together as partners. Dialogue is based on horizontal relationships of mutual trust (Freire 2018, 89). It is also based on critical thinking. For Freire, the ideal critical thinker is one whose individual thought is met with an ability to work with others to improve upon the limitations and oppressions of reality and to change the conditions that lead to these limitations in the first place (Tucker et al. 2013, 39). Genuine dialogue occurs when people make space for both action and reflection (Freire 2018, 87) or where theory and practice are integrated (in what is known as praxis) to encourage action in pursuit of social justice (Stierer 2008, 42). Individuals thus see their potential to be agents of social change (Clark-Taylor 2016, 40) as well as the power relations and systemic aspects of social problems. Through praxis and dialogue, injustice is exposed, and individuals are compelled to work towards social justice.

Freire's work is deeply connected to engaged citizenship. In its ideal form, engaged citizenship is intended as an act of social justice aimed at investigating privilege and eradicating structural oppression. Several studies associate the practice of engaged citizenship, where individuals work in reciprocal relationships to affect social change, with the development of critical consciousness (Ajaps and Obiagu 2021; Clark-Taylor 2016, 105; Tucker et al. 2013).

The notion of engaged citizenship, tied to critical consciousness, is essential for universities. Universities are teaching institutions that prepare graduates to face the challenges of a highly unequal and unjust world. To fulfil this mandate, it is, therefore, crucial that universities develop Freire's conception of praxis: combining the critical consciousness learned in the classroom with the action and reflection that comes with community practice (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 230). The concept of engaged citizenship should therefore resonate with universities. Just as one can trace early conceptions of citizenship to Ancient Greece, one can also find some of the earliest engaged universities coming out of its ancient libraries and institutions. Many modern universities and institutions have grown from the communities that catalysed their emergence and had community engagement strategies based on a sense of interdependence (Watson et al. 2011). The sense of reciprocity, interdependence and collective action associated with the term engaged citizenship may better depict university students' experiences in this community engagement element.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A METHOD OF INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

In this article, the authors use autoethnography to reflect on their experiences as engaged citizens at Rhodes University. Through this motivation, the term “engaged citizen” more appropriately captures the mutual joy, benefit and learning during their engagement with local communities.

Autoethnographies “are highly personalised accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes 2000, 21). Autoethnography is used here to interrogate and use our personal experiences of becoming engaged citizens to understand the impact RUCCE programmes have on the holistic development of students – who are prepared for the real world. We also hope that by using this methodology, we can provide a framework for inclusive, deeply respectful ways of conducting research with many types of “knowers” making the scholarship of engagement more inclusive, valuable and evocative (Jones et al. 2013) and accessible to community partners in particular – who are often left on the periphery of scientific study.

This method (autoethnography) combines aspects of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) to draw on personal experiences (auto-) and sociocultural experiences (ethno-) in systematic analysis (-graphy) (Ellis et al. 2011). As in ethnographies, researchers produce a “‘thick description’ of a culture” (Ellis et al. 2011, 277) they have experienced “for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers)” (Ellis et al. 2011, 275) understand the targeted phenomenon. In this case, we look at the value of engaged citizenship development of students. Similarly, as in autobiographies, the researcher “retrospectively and selectively write(s) about epiphanies” (Ellis et al. 2011, 276) significant and transformative moments and memories that impacted their life as a result of being part of the identified culture. Like autobiographers, researchers in this process evoke empathy and understanding by using illustrative vignettes that “bring ‘readers into the scene’ – particularly into thoughts, emotions, and actions ... to ‘experience an experience’” (Ellis et al. 2011, 277) and possibly evoke a sense of participation or resultant action.

Emerging from postmodern philosophy – which questioned the dominance of traditional research and how ways of knowing were legitimated – autoethnography gave rise to the value of personal experiences to advance sociocultural understanding of the world (Wall 2008). Appreciating that stories are complex and legitimate ways of coming to know and making sense of self and others makes this process distinctively decolonial as it moves away from extractive research² by providing credible and unique ways to share knowledge. (Ellis et al. 2011).

Autoethnography expands the rigid conceptualisation of what constitutes legitimate and meaningful research (Ellis et al. 2011). In this way, autoethnography (as an approach) challenges canonical ways of conducting research and representing people. It “treats research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious ‘act’” (Adams and Holman Jones 2008 in Ellis et al. 2011). The methodology purposefully uses personal stories and memories at its centre to produce meaningful, accessible and evocative research that unearths issues of identity and representation of social phenomena to deepen one’s capacity to empathise with others who are different from us (Ellis et al., 2011).

While the use of memories for research is a contentious issue, it should be highlighted that much of the research in the social sciences relies on memory such as observation notes, researcher reflections, field notes, diaries and interviews. These sources are academically legitimated through their transformation by another researcher (e.g., through transcription). In this article we rely on the memories of our lived experiences in RUCE. Like numerous autoethnographers before us, we use it because we “remember many things ... [and] I am certain that they are correct and not a fantasy” (Wall 2008, 46). And so, the approach accepts the positionality of the researcher (front and centre of the research) and accommodates the influence this has on the research process, acknowledging and accommodating subjectivity and emotionality (Ellis et al. 2011). In this sense, autoethnography “might be more of a philosophy than a well-defined method,” leaving room for “creative latitude” in the process (Wall 2008, 39).

POSITIONING THE AUTHORS

It is important in qualitative research, especially in autoethnography, for authors to reflect on their own personal experiences and background and how these elements may influence their interpretations and the meaning ascribed to their realities (Creswell 2017, 235). In this case, the detached researcher is an impossibility, and the producer of knowledge, and where she is located, is significant (Scotland 2012, 12). It is therefore important for the authors to be self-aware – the writing process, especially considering the reflection required of autoethnography, is not only a voyage of discovery but also one of self-discovery and self-development. Acknowledging one’s positionality and awareness of one’s biases is significant. In the paragraphs below, therefore, we position ourselves as authors of this text.

We are located in South Africa in a small university town of Makhanda in the Eastern Cape province. South Africa has one of the world’s highest and most persistent inequality rates, owing to a legacy of racial discrimination under the apartheid regime and failures to transform the country on the part of the post-apartheid regime (World Bank 2021). Rising poverty and

unemployment, exacerbated further by the Covid-19 pandemic, characterise a country under significant strain (World Bank 2021). As employed, white women in a setting of continued racial inequality, both of us experience a multitude of privileges to which others do not have access. We do recognise that this privilege means that our experiences and interactions with other community members may introduce a power element that we may not indeed be able to understand. In many ways, grappling with this privilege and how to make sense of profoundly unequal space drew us to the practice of engaged citizenship in the first place.

At the same time, the country is not a site of helpless and agency-less individuals: public participation, activism, and protest movements around several issues have emerged in cities, informal settlements, schools and universities. Due to the sheer number of demonstrations, a form of engaged citizenship, South Africa was the “protest capital of the world” in 2020 (Regchand 2020).

Given these various ways in which South Africans exert their agency to challenge an unjust status quo, the development of engaged citizenship in universities is essential in the preparation of South Africa’s future changemakers. The South African 1997 White Paper on Education (henceforth “The White Paper”) affirms community engagement as a priority as part of the transformation of higher education (Ministry of Education 1997). Here, community engagement is described as an essential activity for universities to shift from inequitable apartheid institutions toward a national system serving the country’s needs and building the social responsibility of students and institutions (Hall 2010, 2). The White Paper positions community engagement as a core purpose of higher education and as a way of transforming education by breaking down the division between academy and community while at the same time giving agency to both students and community partners (Paphitis, Bezerra, and Paterson 2021, 11).

This role is significant in the city of Makhanda, where Rhodes University and the authors are located. As the most significant institution and the city’s largest employer, Rhodes University “serves as the educational hub around which the city functions” (Rhodes University 2022). The social responsibility of Rhodes University to make its resources accessible to its broader community is of utmost importance for the sustainability of the city and the institution, since without its community Rhodes University cannot survive. Rhodes University, and its relationship with the surrounding community, has historically been the site for many contradictions, which also imply that the university has a specific social responsibility to redress the role it played in the apartheid era. For example, one crucial moment revealing of Rhodes University’s complicity in apartheid occurred in 1967 when black anti-apartheid activist Steven Biko came to the university as a delegate at a NUSAS (National Union for South African

Students) congress (Hendricks and Vale 2005, 1). Biko and other black student delegates were denied university accommodation as a result of a segregationist ruling, proving that “apartheid was alive and well at Rhodes” (Hendricks and Vale 2005, 1).

At the same time, the Makhanda community relies on Rhodes University. Without the university, the city faces higher unemployment rates; arguably “one of the most serious socio-economic problems facing contemporary South Africa, [which] has its roots in the generally dysfunctional public schooling system” (Rhodes University 2022). Makhanda is a stark representation of the country’s inequality, which manifests most prominently in the education sector. Three of the country’s twenty most expensive private schools are in this town, whilst less than six kilometres east are schools with teacher shortages, scarce learning resources and limited access to water and sanitation (Nomsenge 2018). An inadequate and fractured basic education sector is not only morally impermissible but also threatens the sustainability and relevance of Rhodes University within the community. For many locals, it is perceived to be an unreachable ivory tower. For this reason, Rhodes University has positioned community engagement as a bridge between the institution and the Makhanda community to make the university more relevant and accessible.

At Rhodes University, community engagement refers to activities conducted by university staff or students with community partners through which knowledge is jointly discovered and during which there is a reciprocal exchange of teaching and learning (Rhodes University 2021a, 4). In February 2015, Dr Sizwe Mabizela was inaugurated as the Vice Chancellor of Rhodes University. During his inaugural address, he repositioned Rhodes University such that “our university is not just in Grahamstown [now Makhanda] but is also of and for Grahamstown [Makhanda]” (Rhodes University 2019, 3). This statement reflects a redefinition of the university as one that needs to become more relevant to the Makhanda community (Westaway 2019). In addition, he asserted that Rhodes University, as a higher education institution, has a particular responsibility to confront the unequal and inadequate basic education sector in our city.

This repositioning, and emphasis on the importance of community engagement, took place as we began our university journeys as students at Rhodes University. We first experienced community engagement through the Student Volunteer Programme (SVP) offered by the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Division. As first year students beginning to navigate university life, we spent weekends attending training sessions, where we learned (and unlearned) about community engagement. We were equipped with the tools and knowledge to begin cultivating mutually beneficial relationships (Rhodes University Community Engagement 2016).

In 2018, the name of the Student Volunteer Programme (SVP) changed to the Engaged Citizen Programme (ECP) (Rhodes University Community Engagement 2018) to better encapsulate the mutually beneficially and holistic education (Billings and Terkla 2011; Zaff et al. 2010, 737) that both students and community partners engage in through RUCE programmes. ECP positions itself as a space to grow student social responsibility and work alongside community partners who are “key sources of knowledge to students” (Rhodes University 2021a). This article, therefore, turns to our own experiences as students at Rhodes University and later as staff members of the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division. By recounting our experiences, we hope to demonstrate our community engagement journey and, more specifically, our journey through engaged citizenship, which has cultivated our sense of critical consciousness. Our reflections outline the deficiencies of the term volunteer and the possibility of a shift to engaged citizenship in better depicting our experiences. We recognise that our reflections may not speak to many or even the majority of student volunteers and community partners in the Makhanda context.

VIGNETTES OF TWO ENGAGED CITIZENS

Anna’s reflection: Lessons from the Grahamstown Scout Group

The term VUCA has been used as a buzzword for several years to capture the global social climate filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). Similarly, the word “*Vuka*” is an isiXhosa word meaning “wake up”. These two terms have guided my professional life as the clarion call to wake up and be proactive in addressing the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous social ills of our society – particularly that of young children.

Given the particular injustices that South African children face in the education sector and their relative ability to endure it, my impression of South Africans is that we are impeccably resilient in the face of this VUCA world. However, where children are concerned, I have always maintained that it is our responsibility as adults to disrupt the status quo as the duty bearers for children. We need to “vuka” and proactively work to help our community’s children realise their rights and potential as active citizens with us. I’ve been able to do this by establishing a local scout group – through which I have been able to develop a deeper understanding of self, and others, a tangible awareness of local social problems, and find a space where I am able to work towards social justice (Clark-Taylor 2016, 14).

Scouting has shaped my life, education and career over the last two decades. With my passion for scouting but nowhere to actualise that passion when I arrived in Makhanda (then

Grahamstown) to study, I founded the Grahamstown Scout Group for boys. The group began with the request, through RUCCE, of a local Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) to design an experience that contributes to young boys' development (beyond sport). Knowing the value of scouting in my own life and cognisant of this request, a long and fruitful partnership between the NPO and I began. Children are accepted into the NPO's programs according to particular criteria; in varying degrees, this includes poverty, lack of a stimulating home environment or family disruptions. These children are often imaged as problematic; hardly capable of being agents of change in their community. In turn, they absorb the deficient messaging, which I believe manifests itself as challenging behaviour I often experienced in my early years of working with the group of boys.

In starting the group, I felt bound to continue the traditions and legacy of my own (very suburban, middle-class) experience of scouting. I soon experienced that this group was contextually very different to my own experiences and that what I was delivering as a teacher was irrelevant, too westernised and contextually inappropriate for an under-resourced community. I therefore turned to my passion for innovative teaching methodologies. We moved from adult-centric to child-led learning – inspired by the Regio Emilia approach and forest schooling but navigated for low-socioeconomic primary school boys in the community (Talbot and Saneka 2021). The children began expressing themselves differently. They boldly announced the opinions and needs of the community through expressive campaign posters on the community centre's walls. An anti-bullying campaign followed this initial campaign, a group photo documentary project called "Our Stories", and many other projects of young, engaged citizens. Our boys were noticeably more empowered to participate in matters affecting their lives, significantly and positively altering their behaviour. They had stepped up from being receivers of a programme managed by adults to self-initiating and expressive participants.

One particular child's story will remain with me as an important life lesson. When this child joined the group, my intuition screamed, "trouble maker". In fact, his nickname in the community was *tsotsi* (meaning gangster). At the tender age of 7, he had been roped into the area gangs. Four years after joining the group, children were asked to draw something they were proud of one afternoon. Ordinarily, this child would disrupt tasks like this – but not today. He drew quietly and intensely for the entire hour, taking longer than the other children. On the brink of frustration and asking him to "just put it on the wall", something tuned me into his change, and I left him to continue his drawing. Later I went back to ask if I could caption his image. In the utmost vulnerability and devoid of distraction from the other children, he pointed at his picture and told me, "I once was a Tsotsi, and now I'm not". Although this child's story of change is by no means due solely to my investment in his life, I believe that this time learning

and belonging in the group helped him realise his worth and potential.

My experiences in this scout group have been pivotal in my personal and professional development. Often it is easy to notice the impact of student engagement on a community. It is less explicit what the benefit is to the student and university (Paull et al. 2015, 51). On reflection the scout group has brought me great personal joy and satisfaction. I have been able to watch these children develop, and I've been able to translate and experiment with teaching methodologies that I've learnt about in numerous conferences and lecture halls. This space for praxis and dialogue with key role players (Freire 2018, 87) has significantly contributed to my personal learning and practice as an educator passionate about changing the status quo of South Africa's education sector.

Similarly, I have been embedded in this community for almost nine years. Through this community, I have grown a lived knowledge of the realities and challenges that these children (and my students) experience – lessons in empathy that are critical for relationship building and (in my professional life, mentorship). I feel deeply indebted to the acceptance by my scout community and what they have contributed to my own development (Nussbaum 2006).

Professionally, I feel that starting the scout group was a significant contributing factor to acquiring a job in RUCE. By my final year of university, the programme was well established and home to several students in the ECP. The group was a space to demonstrate my innovation and command of the community engagement principles and values espoused by RUCE. It has also propelled my career by giving me opportunities to present at conferences, publish academically, serve on the board of managers at the NPO and, most importantly, contribute to meaningful social change in a city that has given so much to me. Similarly, it has informed my practice as a community development practitioner – ensuring that I create spaces in our ECPs, particularly in student training, for students to realise social injustices and oppression within our communities, to reflect and be critically aware of their positionality within that crisis and to respond as change makers, contributing to ethical and desirable social change as I have learnt to do through the opportunities afforded to me through ECP (Freire 2018; Nussbaum 2006).

It is essential that opportunities like this remain a central part of the university experience. By giving people (of all ages) agency and independence to choose and creating safe spaces to learn, belong and trust, we can release their full spectrum of potential. In a society filled with social ills, we need to hone VUCA as spaces of opportunity – to disrupt social injustices and take proactive action. A VUCA world demands that we think critically about the role of higher education in our communities and how teaching, learning and research need to appreciate the value of engaged citizenship experiences and their contribution to the academic project. It demands that we avoid traditional models and outdated approaches.

Claire's reflection: Journeying from high school to university and opening my eyes

Anna's Scouting journey, which conveys profound and critical shifts in thinking, in some ways reflects my own community engagement experience. My middle-class upbringing has certainly shaped (or distorted) my understanding of South Africa's reality. In hindsight, my suburban private school education often represented an island of privilege in an otherwise unequal and inadequate education sector. In this space, I first experienced a version of volunteering: we were required to participate in one hour of "outreach" every term. This idea of outreach was never elaborated on, and we were indeed not provided with any training as to how to undertake this school requirement. As learners, we went to animal shelters, dedicating an hour to walking dogs and feeding cats or packing Christmas boxes for underprivileged children. However, we were never given the responsibility to deliver the boxes to said children (or interact with them at all). My friends and I took to signing up for sports events – the longer the event, the more hours we could claim on our outreach forms – which we got our friends and family to sponsor to donate the funds to the Red Cross Children's Hospital. Upon reflection, these acts of charity made other community members distant, different and incomprehensible. I may have been a citizen of the same country as the children we packed Christmas boxes and raised money for, but we existed in entirely different worlds.

This distance changed when I arrived at Rhodes University. Four months into my first year, Rhodes University became the site for the #RURferenceList protest as women refused to remain silent about sexual violence and rape culture on campus. Five months later, I found myself amid #FeesMustFall, a nationwide student protest emerging from a systemic lack of access to tertiary education. This experience showed me that, for many young people in Makhanda, Rhodes University does not symbolise an exciting next step in one's life but an unreachable ivory tower, where lack of opportunity prevents attempts at continuing education. When I was studying History and Politics, I found that the theories of justice, equality, race and gender that I had learned in the classroom suddenly came to life.

This was my first exposure to injustice, and I developed a desire for structural change, perhaps reflecting Freire's (2018, 87) conception of critical consciousness. At the same time, this period in my life was one of profound helplessness: I felt I was looking at the blunt end of an impenetrable, unjust institution and country and could not see myself as an agent of change or part of a solution. My experience in community engagement, in what was then the SVP – as a tutor and mentor at GADRA Education, a local NGO – shifted this mindset. This experience allowed me to see positive change in a localised context. It showed me that reciprocal

relationships, sustained through regular and meaningful contact, are powerful. This experience connected me more deeply to the Makhanda community.

Community engagement first served as a site for transforming the self, where I developed a socially conscious form of citizenship deeply embedded in my context. From this self-transformation, I was able to look at the transformation of the collective to challenge unjust systems in my community. This reflection can be directly linked to the four elements of critical consciousness: a deeper understanding of self, a broader perspective of others, an awareness of social issues, and seeing oneself as able to work towards social justice (Clark-Taylor 2016, 14). My experience at GADRA Education demonstrated that when ordinary people come together, bringing their collective assets to pursue a shared goal, we can challenge the status quo and work towards a better world. While I am one small part of a much bigger team, I am thrilled that GADRA Education is now the most prominent feeder school for Rhodes University, pointing to a remarkable shift in terms of access to education in my town (GADRA Education 2021).

Another pivotal moment in my community engagement journey was in the mentoring space. I have mentored final-year learners at GADRA Education. As part of the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme, which serves to equip learners in selected local schools with the tools they need to pass to their full potential and access tertiary opportunities (McCann, Talbot, and Westaway 2021); learners or “mentees” are partnered with Rhodes University student mentors who guide them through nine structured sessions that prepare them for their final school exams (Rhodes University 2021b).

One of my mentees in the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme showed me the power of reciprocal relationships as a way of building stronger communities and societies (Billings and Terkla 2011). I came to the relationship expecting she would need me, but this was never the case. She took ownership of our mentoring sessions, and our time together became a space for sharing resources and learning. Over this period, I learned when to guide and offer advice but also when to step back and let her claim her own space. We developed a deep connection over this period, and now affectionately refer to each other as “big sister” (me) and “little sister” (her). In a way, our relationship reminds me of the one between siblings, where the older one may have more experience but where the relationship is at its core an equal one. Today, this mentee is a fellow student who has now found herself in the community engagement space as a mentor in this same programme.

I learned a lot about mentoring from this learner, which I have carried with me over the years. Often, when learners hear that a Rhodes University “volunteer” will be their mentor, the ideas around individuals coming in to help or even rescue them from their circumstances begin. The power relationship that inevitably forms even before the first point of contact is no doubt

made worse when I, one of the few white women involved in community engagement, meet my mentees for the first time.

Rather than sidestepping this power relation (and the way it may be a microcosm of the injustices of South African society, where white people have better access to educational and other institutions), I have tried to learn from Freire's (2018, 87) critical consciousness conception where individuals see their potential to be agents of social change (Clark-Taylor 2016, 40) as well as the power relations and systemic aspects of social problems. For this reason, I now begin my mentoring sessions with a piece of drawing paper. On this page, I draw some semblance of a mountain and two stick figures standing right at the bottom of the page. These figures, I tell my new mentee, are us. A learner's final year of high school is like a mountain; nobody can get them to the top but themselves. As their mentor, I will walk this journey with them, and we will work on the climbing strategy and ensure we have the correct climbing equipment together. At points, we will stop to rest and consider how far we have come. We will celebrate the small victories together and then look upwards to decipher how much further there is to go.

I say that we will help each other along this journey, but neither one of us will be able to carry the other partner up our mountain. But we will be able to share our skills and learn from one another, and the relationship that we build through this experience will make the journey a little less daunting. Indeed, I have walked my own mountain alongside many other partners, stakeholders and active citizens in community engagement, who have all made the journey a space of friendship and empathy instead of isolation.

This story begins our mentoring relationship. Thereafter, I usually receive some teasing about my drawing skills, and the power dynamic is (at least partially) disrupted. Many of the relationships with individuals that started with this drawing exercise have lasted years, and I find that reunions with these people are not a coming together of a former volunteer/former victim or even former mentor (big sister)/former mentee (little sister). Rather, over time, we come together as fellow engaged citizens. The value of this conception of engaged citizenship, which comes to life in our stories outlined above, is that it disrupts these frameworks, with their implicit dichotomies of agent/victim, or worse, self/other, to instead portray the importance of our interconnected and mutual effort in the pursuit of just and sustainable community development.

CONCLUSION: A PATCHWORK OF STORIES

These personal stories provide snapshots into our experiences and development as a result of Rhodes University community engagement programmes. The relationships we have built over time with young children, high school learners, NGOs and community champions, as well as

our student peers, have been reciprocal and have been sources of mutual joy and growth. It is therefore critical for these relationships to last and continue to have enduring impact in other students' lives. In this regard the acknowledgement of power relations and privilege continues to be of utmost importance to the longevity of such relationships.

This community engagement practice has been pivotal in our education experience, allowing us to develop a more self-reflective and socially conscious form of citizenship embedded in our contexts and deeply linked to Paulo Freire's conception of critical consciousness. Young people in Makhanda, and in South Africa in general, can often feel helpless in the face of systemic injustice. Still, the people we have encountered along this journey have shown us that reciprocal relationships are powerful, that much of education takes place beyond the classroom, and that we are never alone in the challenges we face. For us, the term engaged citizenship rather than volunteerism appears to encapsulate the transformative potential of this experience far better for students who choose to venture beyond the four corners of a lecture hall or tutorial venue.

We hope that this article, in problematising the term "volunteerism" and putting forward the alternative "engaged citizenship" opens further discourse about the importance of moving away from binary modes of thinking within community engagement theory and practice. Instead, we aim to move towards conceptions that highlight the interconnectedness and interdependence of communities and universities, as well as the need for reciprocal partnerships in the pursuit of social justice.

NOTES

1. Although, one must be mindful that this fledgling right to citizenship was, by today's standards, wholly undemocratic: Ancient Greece as a "xenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist community, economically dependent on slavery [whose system of citizenship excluded] foreigners, women and slaves" (Hall 1997, 93).
2. Our conceptualisation of extractive research is the type of research whereby researchers enter a community, gather data and then "recklessly leav[e] to write about the culture for monetary and/or professional gain, while disregarding relational ties to cultural members" (Ellis et al. 2011, 274)

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