

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MANDATE OF A RURAL-BASED UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In this article, lived experiences of coordinating the community engagement mandate in a rural-based university of South Africa were explored from a personal experiential perspectives. This article explored experiences regarding the involvement regarding coordination of different projects within a rural community-based University, University of Venda. A Qualitative methodology, using an interpretivist paradigm were followed given the type of this article. The article documented a lived experiences of being within the directorate of Community engagement. The researchers has revealed multiple interpretations of the lived experiences as an Community Engagement Manager and Administrative Officer at the CE Directorate . Researchers also used narrative analysis and construct from their own personal experiences, that means there was a dual layer of interpretation of narrative analysis of their own lives.

The shared positive and negative experiences were taken from the engagement with students, academics, NGOs/NPOs, government departments, municipalities, and grassroots communities. Reflections of the researchers will (a) contribute to the understanding of the terrain of coordinating community engagement in rural-based universities in South Africa; (b) identify best practices; and (c) provide recommendations for universities to improve their community engagement enterprise. Experiences contained in this article rarely find space in academic discourse. The invasion of researchers in the academic space might help reshape conference

conversations, thereby opening other pathways of understanding community engagement especially in historically disadvantaged universities. There is also a need for further research on related aspects of the community's involvement.

Keywords: Community engagement, impact, coordinated relationships, rural-based university.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Community engagement (CE) in this article has been referred as a collaboration between Institution of higher learning and their wider communities. Principles of Community Engagemnt (PCE) (1997) defines community engagement as the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioural changes that will improve the health and livelihood of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices Qutoshi, S. B. (2018).

It is therefore a strategic process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation to identify and address issues affecting their well-being. (Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou 2008). The linking of the term “community” to “engagement” serves to broaden the scope, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure consideration is made of the diversity that exists within any community.

Lived experience seeks to understand the distinctions between lives and experiences and tries to understand why some experiences are privileged over others (Boylorn, 2008). This article shared the lived experiences of Supporting the Community Engagement Mandate of a Rural-based University . The importance of lived experience brought by the exposure to observe, and make an awareness or familiarize with, conversance with, understanding what is required to be a Community Engagement Manager and Officers. Experiences in this article comes with involvement and participation in contact with different stakeholders. It involves representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge, it responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences.

However, it also has brought together the stories from different event or occasion to

provide a range of ideas and a bigger picture on issues, thus contributing to an individual's store of resources for recovery. In this article, the researchers were able to locate the experiences of working within the Directorate of Community Engagement Entrepreneurship Inclusive Innovation and Commercialisation. This experience was a depiction of a personal experiences and decision, as well as the knowledge gained from these experiences and choices.

This article seeks to (a) contribute to the understanding of the terrain of coordinating community engagement in rural-based universities in South Africa; (b) identify best practices; and (c) provide recommendations for universities to improve their community engagement enterprise. Experiences contained in this article rarely find space in academic discourse. The researchers hope that the invasion of academic space might help reshape conference conversations, thereby opening other pathways of understanding the mandate of the Universities community engagement, especially in historically disadvantaged universities. The question will then be what are those mandate?

The institutions of higher learning were mandated to integrate community engagement into teaching and learning and research as the third core business. This meant that whatever is being taught in lecture rooms should be applicable in real life for the development of the community and research should be conducted to benefit the community to redress the past inequalities, meanwhile (Johnson, 2020) mentioned that community engagement professionals experience numerous barriers even though community engagement is the third mission of the university alongside first, teaching and learning, and second, research. Community engagement professionals often refer to community engagement as the stepchild of higher education. Yet there are also inter-related successful drivers.

The mandate of coordinating institutional community engagement rest within the Community Engagement Directorates while the implementation thereof is the responsibility of Faculties, Institutes, Centres, and Departments. The Directorate must ensure that the institution is contributing to the development of the community thereby collating the reports of their involvement. Community engaged research should be seen to be improving the livelihoods of the community. It creates an opportunity for students and academics to put learning into practice and research problems that contribute to their development. The coordination of community engagement activities in this article refers to liaising with multi stakeholders including academics, students, local, provincial, and national government departments, municipalities, NGO's, NPO's, international communities, institutions, and organisations.

PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERPRETIVISTS PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS PARADIGM

The theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value and one which sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of experience, has been central in phenomenological studies. Even though phenomenologists seem to have different views on issues, there is fairly a general agreement on their core philosophical viewpoints as a belief that the consciousness is central and understanding the subjective consciousness is important. Qutoshi, (2018). This view posits that consciousness has some specific structures which are gate ways to gain direct knowledge through reflections. Perhaps, these philosophical stand points guide the researchers in understanding the phenomena at conscious level of its appearance that how things appear directly to us rather than through the media of cultural and symbolic structures (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Therefore, description of events as they appear as a method of knowing in phenomenology is fundamental because it is a matter of describing, explaining, or analysing.

Phenomenology as a philosophy provides a theoretical guideline to researchers to understand phenomena at the level of subjective reality. Probably, this philosophical framework or the theory of subjective reality plays a key role in understanding the actor or the subject regarding a particular event or a phenomenon relating to his/her life (Gee, 1991, Qutoshi, 2018). Phenomenology interpretative as a method of inquiry is not limited to an approach to knowing, it is rather an intellectual engagement in interpretations and meaning making that is used to understand the lived world of human beings at a conscious level. Historically, Husserl' (1913/1962) perspective indicates phenomenology as a science of understanding human beings at a deeper level by gazing at the phenomenon. (Riessman, 1993)

The data collection and meaning making in phenomenological research takes place simultaneously. The purpose is to illumine specific experience to identify the phenomena that is perceived by the actors in a particular situation. The emphasis is on subjectivity and personal knowledge in perceiving and interpreting the phenomena from the research participant point of view (Lester, 1999). However, the notion behind all these philosophical and methodological views of phenomenology and procedures are directly linking to the core concept of understanding the phenomena related to human being with a deeper level of consciousness, (Qutoshi, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Interpretivists phenomenological analysis paradigm were followed given the type of this article. Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Smith and Osborn (2015) indicated that interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a qualitative approach which aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience. It produces an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions and it recognises that this is an interpretative endeavour as humans are sense-making organisms Andrews, et al, 2004). It is explicitly idiographic in its commitment to examining the detailed experience of each case in turn, prior to the move to more general claims.

The article documented a lived experiences of being within the Directorate of Community engagement. Multiple interpretations of the lived experiences as a Community Engagement Manager or Officer has been revealed in this article. Narratives in this article were derived from coordination and participating in activities to support the community engagement mandate of a rural-based University in South Africa, such activities includes conversation with different stakeholders within and outside the University, organizing events such as conferences, workshops, stakeholders' meetings and focus group discussion.

The article investigated the phenomenon under which the context of CE has been provided so that context-related experiences meaning is provided. Englander (2019) indicates that the knowledge claim centres on meaning rather than sample size and strategies, the researchers did use purposive sampling of events and experiences, documenting their experiences and self-reflection.

FINDINGS

Documented Experiences

The work of community engagement is complex in nature because it involves engaging different stakeholders from different backgrounds. The work is challenging taking into consideration the amount of work involved and often short notice and tight deadlines. It is challenging to manage and administer a wide scope of activities which require lots of logistics and compliance (policies and procedures) issues as compared to the human power required to pull up the work (Boylorn, 2008).

Moreover, the work brings different challenges which demand different approaches all the time. Further to that such complexity of work requires one to get out of routine and be creative to achieve the set goal. As a Manager and/ or Administrator the work environment conditioned the researchers to do almost everything including amongst others receptionist, secretarial, typist,

messenger, events manager, project manager, research assistant, social worker, mentor, donor, administrator etc.

Engagement with students

While supporting the mandate of community engagement the researchers also got involved with students on different levels of their studies, and by that it brings different scenarios within the department of community engagement. For example, students would come through to the directorate with referrals or on personal inquiry while others would come for supervision purpose by the Director. All these activities trained the researchers to be able to service different groups according to their needs. The researchers learned to probe more questions to students especially when they are not stating the needs clearly for researchers to figure out how to assist or refer.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY THE RESEARCHERS

Being the central point of contact in the directorate for staff, students, and communities

The office structure of the directorate leaves an operational vacuum for researchers to be the only point of contact for staff, students, and communities to handle their request to provide assistance and guidance. Researchers are required to support and assist in all community engagement activities on and off campus more so because most people are not aware of the structure in the directorate.

Working on multiple tasks with tight deadlines

It has become normal in the directorate to work on multiple tasks with tight deadlines. It's overwhelming to work on different tasks which are competing for resources in terms of manpower, finance, venue, time etc. It is taxing on one's attention to provide that much needed quality of work.

Navigating the procurement system

The procurement system has become the stumbling block of effective and efficient service delivery to support staff. When handling projects or initiatives that requires external service providers it has become a norm to beg for service from colleagues who would not be understanding the magnitude and complex nature of the work at hand with too much expectation to achieve more in short space of time.

Limited resources

The directorate has limited resources be it manpower, financial, space etc. This situation adds to more pressure especially when we are expected to support community engagement initiatives university wide with limited resources or zero resources while the directorate could not afford to maintain its own administrative activities. Hence the faculties and other university entities are expectant to be supported by the directorate for their community engagement initiatives. When the directorate stretches its resources to support others the onus comes to researchers to figure out how such support could be provided from the already strained departmental budget.

Accessibility

Being the CE Manager and Admin Officer in CE Directorate means being accessible by different stakeholders as first contact. This means also attending to community, staff, and student's request. Such requests are brought with the positive minds of getting solution to the problem from the directorate. Being in the position not to be able to assist put researchers under pressure especially when in a position unable to meet the needs requested by desperate community partners, students, and staff.

Collaboration

As a support staff in the Community Engagement Directorate Office, the researchers learned to work in a collaborative manner. There is no way that the office can run successfully without collaboration and support of other people. The researchers also work as a supportive system of all CE projects and activities in Faculties/Directorates//Departments/Centres/ Institutes/ students organisations and external stakeholders. Though it's a good thing it tend to bring more pressure in instances where multiple activities are coming from different directions and the researchers are expected to be part of all of them. At the end when it was impossible to be available in those activities it seems like others are not given support or priority.

Ambassador

Being in the central point it is important to be aware of the institutional direction as at some point stakeholders would expect some information. It is crucial to know the details on most aspects of the university since in some instances the researcher may be required to make referrals to relevant people within the institution. When in public forums people expect to get institutional information they inquire therefore it is important to be in anticipation of such reaction to be able to provide such information such as programmes, applications and admission process, projects the university has etc.

Advocacy

The work required the researchers to promote the community engagement agenda of the university within and outside the university. It also brings the responsibility of encouraging students to be active and responsible citizens by initiating programmes that would bring changes to the surrounding communities e.g., Vhamaandafhadzi Foundation, Legal Ambassadors, Spot the Sport etc. I also encourage academics who are doing community work and those who have no understanding of what community engagement is.

DISCUSSION

The article shared experiences of staff who are actively involved in coordinating and managing community research projects. Working in community engagement require somebody with passion in serving others and making some differences where need be. The complex nature of supporting community engagement required a focused mind with dedication to make contribution to the operational plans of the institution. The researchers are appreciative of serving in the community engagement as it is the perfect sport where the institution could bring meaning to teaching and learning and research and innovation. The meaning that will make a different to the surrounding community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this article has shown the importance of community engagement within the institution of higher learning, the article also recommends that there should be a great support for community engagement in Universities in terms of resources. As a core business the community engagement should also be prioritised in terms of resources as this would promote engaged teaching and learning and engaged research. This would make it easier for the CEEIIC Directorate to provide the support to faculties, departments, institutes, centres, and students organisations.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This article was limited since it was conducted by a fledgling researchers, who have an experience in terms of coordinating and managing community engagement projects within the Institution of higher learning. There may be flaws in terms of methodologies and how those lived experiences were narrated.

CONCLUSION

Community engagement include organised groups, agencies, institutions, or individuals or different stakeholders. Collaboration is also part of the community engagement activities. Building and implementing University Community effective strategies requires a solid grounding in the best tools, techniques, and information available.

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