Book Review

Knowledge as Enablement: Engagement between Higher Education and the Third Sector in South Africa

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According to its preface, Knowledge as Enablement: Engagement Between Higher Education and the Third Sector in South Africa aims:

1) to stimulate debate around issues at the interface between higher education institutions and the third sector of society, and 2) to highlight the unique role of such relationships in contributing to knowledge enablement. (p. 18)

It seems appropriate, then, that the book should be reviewed from the perspective of both those within and outside the academy. One of us is an activist scholar (D'Souza, 2009), based in a South African university, and one of us works outside of the academy in what we term uncivil society as well as in bits of civil society. Over the years, we have chosen to work together on a fairly regular basis, reflecting on and learning from this engagement with each other. We bring our resultant thinking to this review.

As is clear from its title, the book is concerned with issues of knowledge, enablement, and engagement, primarily between the university and the third sector. By the third sector, the book means that sector which is not the public (government) or private (business) sector. The editors consider this concept to be inclusive of many types of organised civil society, not simply formally registered nonprofit organisations. Enablement is used in contrast to empowerment, as explained in the first chapter of the book. Whereas empowerment implicitly suggests that one more powerful entity (the higher education institution) transfers some of its power to the less powerful entity (the community), enablement is about making something possible, and is “collaborative, reciprocal and focused on mutual transformation” (Janze van Rensburg, 2014, p. 41).

The editors argue that community engagement (CE), as the third core function of higher education institutions (alongside teaching and learning, and research), often involves relationships with the third sector. “However, what happens at the interface between higher education institutions and third sector organisations has not been explored in any depth in the South African context” (p. 22), and “there remain conceptual and theoretical gaps in this knowledge field [of community
The book tries to fill these gaps, drawing on collaborative research activities and working from the premise that there is an essential link between enablement and knowledge creation, and that through CE, both higher education and third-sector organisations can potentially create knowledge to solve relevant problems.

Bringle’s foreword to the book clearly situates the book within a “fundamental epistemological shift in higher education,” from the academy as the creator of knowledge, which is then disseminated to communities in order to fix problems, to “a new model of civic engagement that emphasises partnerships that are democratic (just, participatory, inclusive), reciprocal, and transformative” (2014, p. 19). The term, enablement, attempts to capture this. It thus critiques the model of communities as dependent, and seeks to shift the power relations between universities and communities by offering both a critique of existing forms of CE, and models of alternatives.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is primarily conceptual, whilst the second focuses on the third sector (to address a limited understanding of the sector). The final section considers specific case studies and new approaches, including a variety of possible forms of CE. Most of the contributors to the book are either from the University of the Free State, or formerly from this institution, or with links to it. Two contributors are from nonprofit organisations, whilst the remainder are from other universities in South Africa and the United Kingdom. Many of those within universities have some kind of community development experience or linkages.

The editors comment that scholarly work on CE “actually disturbs us and forces us to rethink the normal patterns of thought, belief and the very nature of scholarship” (p. 24); and reading the book has indeed profoundly disturbed us on a number of levels. Whilst Knowledge as Enablement is a collection of fairly disparate chapters with no stated overarching paradigm or theoretical or conceptual framework other than the broad position discussed above, there are clear underlying assumptions threaded through whole that we would like to interrogate.

Whilst the book problematises some of the ways in which CE has been conceived and applied, the very language of community engagement is about an other, about something out there from which the university is separate. This assumes and reinscribes a fundamentally elitist and ultimately contemptuous relation between the academy and its other, “the community.” This slippage between what the book claims to be trying to do, and what it seems to us actually to be doing, is also evident in the concept of enablement. This is presented as an attempt to address unequal power relations but in fact assumes, a priori, and reinscribes an assumption of “disability,” along the lines of the “capacity building” (which assumes a lack of capacity) so popular within NGO-speak.

Throughout, whilst third sector is used as a more inclusive term, in fact it is formally registered nonprofit organisations that are primarily discussed. Within the book’s index, there is no entry for social movements at all; and indeed, reading the book would lead anyone to believe that this critical form of organisation was basically absent from the South African context. This is particularly disappointing given the growing body of work that argues that significant knowledge and theory is generated by social movements (Barker & Cox, 2002; Choudry, 2009; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Eyerman & Jameson, 1991; Foley, 1999; Gouin, 2009; Harley, 2012; Scandrett et al., 2010)—which could, presumably, “enable” universities.

In fact, far from engaging subaltern social movements, the book’s editors say that whilst higher education institutions could collaborate with a variety of civil society organisations, “when the aim of CE is to engage more closely with the developmental spaces where grassroots struggles are taking place” (p. 26), it is often useful and productive to partner with nonprofit organisations. But what if
these institutions (along with universities, faith-based organisations, and community-based organisations) are themselves deeply implicated in the ongoing assault on, and containment of, popular power or grassroots struggle? It is problematic not to recognise and problematise the deeply distorted and distorting relations of power and representation that these organisations assume and hold on to mediate, gate keep, and control the community—including how these relations radically infantilise the community, assuming and reinforcing the notion that “the people” cannot (and indeed, may not) present themselves but must accept their relentless representation by others.

Indeed, the entire book largely ignores the ways in which the alliance of capital, the state, and the development project (as punted by the third sector) have created precisely the state of things that urgently requires redress (and hence, theoretically, CE). By not recognising this, and by entering into partnerships with structures that reinforce and reinscribe relations of injustice and inequality, however committed we may be to doing good in the world, we will simply reproduce that which we claim to be attempting to address.

Whilst we are critical of this book, nevertheless, it remains a useful contribution to the field, particularly for those already involved in CE. As mentioned above, there is relatively little published work on CE in the African context, and even less in South Africa; *Knowledge as Enablement* certainly does not fill this gap, but it does at least begin a much needed conversation, starting from a point that already problematises the field.

However, as Gibson (2011) commented:

> The intellectual committed to social change, Fanon argues, is fundamentally alienated from the people and needs to fundamentally change the elitism, internalized values and ways of thinking they have imbibed. (Section 2, para. 1)

We start from the premise that universities are not monolithic; they are contested spaces and places. Nevertheless, as Gramsci (1971) argued, university intellectuals largely play the role of consolidating the hegemony of the ruling class. We do this through our teaching (in what we teach, and how we teach it), through our research (in what we research, and why we research, and how we research), and through our community engagement (in who we engage with, and why, and how). What we need now is deep critical reflection, and a moving against and beyond what is (Holloway, 2010).

**References**


