# Infusing service-learning in curricula: a theoretical exploration of infusion possibilities

## Amanda Hlengwa

## Abstract

In South Africa one result of the appeal for greater social responsiveness from Higher Education institutions has been for service-learning, a component of Community Engagement, to be infused into curricula in higher education. This paper suggests that infusion of service-learning into curricula is based on broad assumptions which need to be researched further. There are complexities which need to be considered regarding the potential of service-learning to bridge the gap between the university and society, and the extent to which it is the most appropriate pedagogic tool for this purpose. This paper argues that Basil Bernstein's theory of classification and framing as well as his work on vertical and horizontal discourses is potentially useful for understanding the factors that could impact on infusing service-learning into curricula. Thus, the potential of Bernstein's work to provide insights into the possibilities and constraints of infusing service-learning into the curricula is explored.

## Introduction

The literature (Butin, 2005; Bringle and Hatcher, 1995; CHE, 2006; Furco, 1996; Stanton and Cruz, 1999) frames service-learning as having the potential to create a balance between *service*, which occurs in the community, and *learning*, which is thought to be the domain of the university, thus allowing students to move between the everyday discourses of the community into the elevated discourses of the university.

The focused attention that higher education bestows on service-learning can be traced to two themes that impact on higher education internationally: transformation and social responsiveness of higher education systems. According to policy statements from the Council on Higher Education (CHE), service-learning is ideal in addressing these themes because "…[service-learning] is entrenched in a discourse that proposes the development and transformation of higher education in relation to community needs" (CHE, 2006).

South African universities experience pressure from bodies such as the CHE, recommending that service-learning (which is within the Community Engagement continuum) be seen as part of a new social contract between the university and society. One way in which to measure response to the CHE's recommendation is to examine service-learning activity within universities. The literature available indicates a focused attention on the benefits of service-learning to theorise and inform curriculum decisions. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning and Learning Styles Inventory is frequently cited to legitimise service-learning activities (Roos, Temane, Davis, Prinsloo, Kritzinger, Naude and Wessels, 2005; CHE, 2006; Ash and Clayton, 2004; Marchel, 2004; Oates and Leavitt, 2003; Pribbenow, 2005). Kolb's work accounts largely for the student experience and therefore inadequately guides where, how, when and why service-learning can be infused into the curriculum. A theoretical account of the structural possibilities for infusing service-learning in higher education curricula is therefore needed.

I propose that Basil Bernstein's (2000) theory of vertical and horizontal discourses as well as his work on classification and framing have the potential to provide insights into the possibilities and constraints of infusing service-learning in the curriculum.

This paper argues for research to be done that can offer a theoretical framing at a systemic level for service-learning in higher education. Two broad assumptions related to service-learning need to be investigated. The first assumption concerns the extent to which service-learning can bridge the gap between higher education and society in order to fulfil the new social contract. This assumption needs to be problematised given that universities and society function with different knowledge forms. Traversing these different forms may be complex, both for students and the community.

The second area in which research needs to be conducted is related to providing theoretical bases on which decisions are made regarding where, how, when and why service-learning is infused in curricula. An important factor that can be considered regarding how decisions regarding infusion of service-learning in curricula are made would be to take into consideration how disciplines are structured. In this paper, I argue that Bernstein's (1971, 1977) classification and framing theory has the potential to illuminate how discipline structures impact on whether a discipline enables or constrains infusion.

The first part of the paper contextualises the policy argument made for service-learning in South Africa focusing on the themes of transformation and social responsiveness. The paper then clarifies service-learning and suggests a theoretical framework for examining the conditions for interplay between service-learning and disciplines. At this point the paper illustrates how borrowing from Bernstein's work (2000) potentially provides a theoretical framework for service-learning.

## Context

Post-apartheid, South Africa not only had to confront processes of democratisation but also the processes of globalisation which had been shown to be the main drivers of the reconfiguration of Higher Education at an international level (Kraak, 2000). It is not difficult to understand why developments derived from a global agenda were accepted with little or no opposition from South African stakeholders, seeing that they seemed aligned with the national agenda of redressing the effects of apartheid in all sectors of South African society. In the education arena, the national agenda translated into a need to construct new social relationships between government, communities and educational institutions.

In the foreword of the 1997 White Paper on Education (RSA, 1997, p.3), the then Minster of Education, Professor Sibusiso Bengu, noted that "The transformation of the higher education system needs to reflect the changes that are taking place in our society and to strengthen the values and practices of our new democracy. . .The higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities." This statement conveyed the seriousness with which the democratically elected government of South Africa took issues of transformation particularly in the higher education sector.

The White Paper (RSA, 1997, p.7) alludes to the many purposes of higher education and then outlines four purposes contextualised in the current status of the country. The purpose that specifically speaks to the closer relationship between higher education and society mentioned earlier is "[t]o contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens.

Higher education encourages the development of a reflective capacity and a willingness to review and renew prevailing ideas, policies and practices based on a commitment to the common good" (RSA, 1997, p.7).

The tradition of polarising *the* university and *the* society creates an impression that each has a stereotypical homogenised form. Policy statements argue against this polarisation, because the continued bifurcating of higher education and society can no longer exist without an adverse effect on South Africa's ability to compete in the international arena (Kraak, 2000). It is in this context that the CHE frames service-learning as part of a new social contract between the university and society.

## Transformation and social responsiveness

In both developed and developing countries, institutions of higher education grapple with the challenges of transformation and social responsiveness. These challenges are driven by the demands of globalisation. The White Paper (RSA, 1997) describes globalisation as referring to ". . .multiple, inter-related changes in social, cultural and economic relations, linked to widespread impact of the information and communications revolution, the growth of trans-national scholarly and scientific networks, the accelerating integration of the world economy and intense competition among nations for markets" (p.9). The impact of globalisation on higher education has meant that the traditional functions and responsibilities of universities are ". . .increasingly being located within the demands of economic productivity and its requirements for particular kinds of knowledge and skills" (Singh, 2001, p.8). Singh argues for a broader understanding and conceptualisation of social responsiveness. She warns against the danger of interpreting social responsiveness as a one-dimensional demand that higher education produce graduates in order to ". . .give a competitive edge to country performance in the global market place"(Singh, 2001, p.9). Singh goes on to argue that, in the South African context, social responsiveness cannot be viewed narrowly in terms of economic and global competitiveness. In the context of South Africa's national agenda of eradicating apartheid and other colonising legacies, the transformation of the higher education sector needs to be conceived as part of the national agenda of reconstructing and democratising the country.

Harvey and Knight in Waghid (2002) add to Singh's broadened notion of social responsiveness when they suggest, as an indicator of transformation in

higher education, that the university should produce graduates whose proficiency is not locked within the discipline: "[h]igher education has a role to prepare people to go beyond the present and be able to respond to a future which cannot be imagined" (Waghid, 2002, p.459).

To achieve the mandate of a broadened transformation agenda, writers such as Singh (2001) and Calhoun (1998, in Singh, 2001) propose the re-insertion of 'public good' as a focus in higher education. Singh understands public good to be the combination of the existence of higher education *as* a public good and higher education playing a role in the *achievement* of public good in its purpose and functions (Singh, 2001). The achievement of the public good requires a deeper inquiry into the ways in which the core activities of higher education (teaching, research and community service) could yield public good benefits.

Following the arguments outlined above it is possible to see how the new social contract between higher education and society as well as the public good debate became the bedrock for the focused attention on community engagement activities such as service-learning. However, the following complexities have not been taken into consideration: the differences within and between higher education and society's differential relation to knowledge; how knowledge is structured, how it is valued as well as how knowledge is used in different contexts by different communities of practice.

## Service-learning

The term service-learning is understood in a variety of different ways. It would be helpful at this point to frame the understanding of the term in the context of this paper. Examining the variations, it can be seen that the variants indicate where the emphasis or importance is placed. Examples of this are the terms 'academic service-learning' and 'community service-learning'. In an attempt to avoid a tilted emphasis and to create a balanced focus, the term is hyphenated to illustrate a balance as well as an interrelationship between service and learning (Furco, 1996). Through this interrelationship there is a kind of service and a kind of learning that is generated through service-learning (CHE, 2006).

Bringle and Hatcher's (1995, p.112) frequently cited definition firmly frames service-learning within the curriculum ambit, distinguishing it from the various forms of community-engaged learning:

> Service-Learning is a credit bearing, educational, experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

It is not difficult to understand why Bringle and Hatcher's definition is frequently used in the South African context as it aligns with the framing of service-learning as having the potential to contribute significantly to the call for higher education to place less emphasis on ivory tower deliberations and engage with societal issues, thereby showing a more visible measure of social responsiveness (Singh, 2001).

The outlined potential of service-learning is congruent with perceptions expressed in the field, "[C]ombining theory with practice, classrooms with communities, the cognitive with the affective, service-learning seemingly breaches the bifurcation of lofty academics with the lived reality of everyday life" (Butin, 2005, p.vii). Thus the argument for service-learning as the ideal pedagogic tool is built. As it stands, this argument does not consider the complexities that exist regarding classification and framing of disciplines which impact on the possibility of infusing service-learning in curricula.

## The disciplines and service-learning

American-based authors, Mabry and Parker-Gwin, (1998) list the following disciplines as having successfully incorporated service-learning: Anthropology, Environmental Science, Psychology, Education, Political Science, Economics, Biology, Social Science, Mathematics and Physics. In the South African context, examples feature more prominently in the social sciences and disciplines which have a professional orientation, such as Psychology (Roos, *et al.*, 2005), Pharmacy (Karekezi, Wrench, Quinn, Belluigi and Srinivas, 2007) and Information Studies (Bell, 2007). The trend can also been noted in the 2008 CHE publication (*Service-Learning in the disciplines Lessons from the field)* where the majority of the cases come from the professional disciplines (CHE, 2008).

Perusal of the literature suggests an imbalance. In some disciplines, examples of service-learning activity are profuse while in others there is a dearth of examples. Given this observation, the questions that come to mind are 'Where, how, when and why is service-learning possible?' In answering these questions, following Archer, 1995, the research that I argue needs to be done will attempt to identify the structural, cultural and agential factors which enable or constrain the infusion of service-learning in disciplines.

In the next section of the paper I illustrate how Bernstein's theories have the potential to explore and provide insights regarding the two broad assumptions, namely the potential for service-learning to bridge the gap between higher education and society as well as the extent to which it is the appropriate pedagogic tool for this purpose.

Extent to which service-learning can bridge the gap between higher education and society Bernstein distinguishes between two forms of knowledge within two discourses, namely the vertical discourse and the horizontal discourse. Vertical discourse has been described as:

> . . . tak[ing] the form of a coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure, hierarchically organised as in the sciences, or . . . [taking] the form of a series of specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation and specialised criteria for the production and circulation of texts as in the social sciences and humanities (Bernstein, 2000, p.157).

What Bernstein describes as vertical discourse can be largely categorised as the formal educational knowledge domain. Within vertical discourse he makes a further distinction between scientific (vertical knowledge structure) and humanities (horizontal knowledge structure) disciplines which have their own distinctive knowledge structures.

Bernstein's description of horizontal discourse is that it is typified as 'common sense' knowledge, whose features are ". . . likely to be oral, local, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered … segmentally organised and contradictory across but not within contexts" (Bernstein, 2000, p.157). In short, here Bernstein describes society at large.

Bernstein's definition and characterisation of vertical and horizontal discourses are indicative of the polarised relationship between higher education (namely the university) and society at large (namely the community) which, according to policy statements, service-learning has the potential to

breach. It is evident in Bernstein's definition that knowledge is conceived, privileged and used differently in the two discourses.

Another important factor for infusion possibilities is the relationship between knowledge and its social and cultural contexts. An aspect of this relationship which needs to be explored by research is "the degree to which meaning is dependent on its context" (Maton, 2009, p.46). This relationship between knowledge and its context Maton refers to as semantic gravity. "When semantic gravity is stronger, meaning is more closely related to its context of acquisition or use; when it is weaker, meaning is less dependent on its context" (Maton, 2009, p.46). Strengthening and weakening of semantic gravity is an important aspect to consider for service-learning infusion because semantic gravity can indicate the transferability of knowledge from one context to another. Disciplines seen to have ". . .ideas or skills that are strongly tied to their contexts of acquisition, problematising transfer and knowledge-building remains a pressing concern in educational debates ranging from the humanities (Christie and Macken-Horarik, 2007) to science (Tytler, 2007)" (Maton, 2009, p.43). Therefore it is possible to expect that a discipline which exhibits context dependent knowledge is likely to be more constrained in its ability to infuse service-learning in the curriculum because of the limited scope of transferring its knowledge outside the context of the discipline.

The distinction related to how knowledge is structured in the two discourses raises the need to problematise the assumption that the everyday knowledge of society and that of formalised educational knowledge (the domain of universities) can be bridged. Theoretical exploration is required to examine this assumption by using Bernstein's vertical and horizontal discourse as a frame. There are some foreseeable complexities that need to be considered in order to bridge the two discourses, namely how knowledge is privileged differently within the discourses. Another issue that requires research attention is the question of what can be gained and/or lost by bridging the gap between vertical and horizontal discourse. The research proposed in this article has the potential to reveal other important and complex considerations which may impact on infusion possibilities.

## Service-learning, the ideal pedagogic tool

Bernstein's (1971, 1977) work looks at disciplines and gives them a code based on whether they have a weak or strong classification and framing.

Classification and framing are linked by Bernstein to issues of power and control in relation to how knowledge is structured. "I will now proceed to define two concepts, one for the translation of power, of power relations, and the other for the translation of control relations. . ." (Bernstein, 2000, p.5). Power in this instance is demonstrated by how boundaries between different disciplines are created, legitimated and reproduced to have relative strength or relative weakness. The strength and weakness of boundaries between disciplines are dependent on whether disciplines are insular in relation to each other or if they are similar to each other. So therefore disciplines which are insular in relation to each other are 'strongly' bounded and those similar to each other are 'weakly' bounded. Weak boundaries are signified by '-'and strong boundaries by '+'.

In the context of the kind of research which this article argues for, classification (C) would therefore describe the strength along a continuum from -C to +C of the different disciplines within the university. It would be useful for the proposed research to identify the relative strength or weakness of boundaries between the disciplines, and more importantly for service-learning infusion, to identify the relative strength or weakness of discipline boundaries in relation to the world outside of the university.

Control on the other hand focuses on ". . .legitimate forms of communication *within*. . .categories" (Bernstein, 1975). Therefore the relative strength of control within categories such as disciplines is referred to by Bernstein as framing and occurs along a continuum (-F to +F).

In essence, framing refers to the internal operation or ***how*** strongly what counts as legitimate within the discipline is regulated and controlled. The relative strengths of classification (+ -C) and framing (+ -F) are the structuring principles of practices that will be used to help illuminate possibilities of infusing service-learning in curricula.

Using classification and framing as a framework highlights complexities related to service-learning being the ideal pedagogic tool. It is possible to infer that in disciplines where classification and framing are strong, difficulties regarding infusion possibilities may occur. However, further extrapolation may be required. Maton's (2000) Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) has the potential to uncover underlying principles that generate curriculum, knowledge and discourse structures. This theory comprises five dimensions; for the proposed research the two dimensions that are relevant are

Specialisation and Semantics. Maton asserts that these dimensions bring together sociological and epistemological understandings of knowledge. The dimensions have the potential to further reveal the enabling and constraining factors of service-learning infusion in curricula through focused attention paid to the underlying principles structuring the practices within the disciplines. "This approach views the practices and beliefs of actors as embodying competing claims to legitimacy. . ." (Maton, 2009, p. 45).

This may point to certain disciplines being better suited for infusion than others. This may also account for why there seems to be an imbalance in the adoption of service-learning as a pedagogic strategy.

Combining Bernstein and Maton's work presents opportunities to conduct research before more conclusive annotations can be made related to factors which impact on service-learning infusion into curricula. Earlier in this paper an explanation of how Bernstein differentiates between knowledge structures in the vertical and the horizontal discourse was provided. Within the vertical discourse hierarchal and horizontal knowledge structures exist which can be characterised by either weaker (for the former) or stronger (for the latter) semantic gravity. However, deeper examination is required. For example, within the vertical discourse the discipline structures have aspects with quite weak semantic gravity, while some aspects of the same discipline may have stronger semantic gravity. It is plausible to infer that the potential to infuse service-learning into the curriculum of a discipline or an aspect of the discipline with a weaker semantic gravity is increased. On the other hand, the potential of infusing service-learning in a discipline or an aspect of the discipline with a stronger semantic gravity is lessened. This is because meaning in the latter discipline is more tied to the context of its acquisition making it more difficult for knowledge in this context to be transferable into another context.

Research that examines the capacity for knowledge to be transferable between the vertical and the horizontal discourse is needed in order to critique the argument that service-learning is the ideal pedagogic tool to bridge higher education and society.

# Conclusion

In this paper I have highlighted the pressures impacting on higher education and therefore requiring "universities to bridge the gap between higher education and society" (Waghid, 2002, p.457). Globally, and within the South African context, there is an increased shift from 'disciplinary' research towards 'problem-solving' or applied research, as a result of the growing demand for universities to be socially responsive and accountable (Muller, 2000). This backdrop helped frame some of the influential recommendations and policies which themselves help frame the assumption of service-learning as the ideal response to these pressures in post apartheid South Africa.

I have argued for research to be conducted into the legitimacy of the assumptions made for the need for and the appropriateness of service-learning as a pedagogic strategy to bridge the gap between higher education and society. What can be gained and what will be at stake when considering a closer relationship between the vertical discourse of the academy and the horizontal discourse of the community?

Secondly I have argued the necessity to consider the enabling and constraining factors which impact on service-learning as an ideal pedagogic tool and finally for the research to possibly provide a theoretical frame on which curriculum decisions of where, how, when and why service learning can be infused in curricula.

I have argued for the use of Bernstein's work as a framework to explore these assumptions further.

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Amanda Hlengwa
Rhodes University

a.hlengwa@ru.ac.za