

Original Paper

Engaged and Activist Scholarship for Socio-Economic Development in South Africa: A Conceptual Appraisal

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Abstract

The debate around scholarship (engaged and activist) is new in South Africa. Currently, the practice of engaged scholarship and activist scholarship is poor or quasi-inexistent, yet, it is believed that these two approaches can contribute to human rights activism which favours socio-economic development. This paper identifies the patterns and principles of engaged scholarship and activist scholarship and their connection with socio-economic development. It argues that effective engaged and activist scholarship programmes can contribute to and facilitate socio-economic development. Thus, the paper suggests a model outlining four key principles forming a conceptual framework for an effective engaged scholarship and a supporting activist scholarship model that facilitates the awareness and participation of communities in socio-economic development efforts.

Keywords

Activist scholarship, socio-economic development, engaged scholarship, public good, transformation, institutions of higher education

1. Introduction

Alleviating poverty, achieving socio-economic development and redressing the imbalances and inequality inherited from the apartheid regime have been part of the major challenges of the South African democratic government. Various legislations, policies, strategies and programmes have been developed and implemented in this regard but proved insufficient. Similarly, many actors have embarked on the journey to prosperity, justice and equality but have reaped mediocre results. Two important actors of development debated in this paper are the institutions of higher education and the

communities in their joint-venture towards development through the engaged scholarship and the activist scholarship approaches.

Scholarship in this par is constituted of the engaged scholarship and the activist scholarship. Engaged scholarship is centred on both the academic service learning by the institutions of higher education and the community-based research and action within the community. These two focus areas bring together the academia and the community to develop and implement projects that can contribute to alleviating poverty, redressing the imbalances and inequality of the past in order to achieve socio-economic development.

Poor and marginalised communities are often unaware of both their socio-economic and political rights and their responsibilities. Being unaware of one's rights prevents the person or community to (1) claim such rights, and (2) participate in socio-economic development planning and activities. Raising awareness of communities on their socio-economic and political rights through activist scholarship is the most important step in bringing people and communities out of poverty and inequality. This paper suggests that an engaged scholarship and an activist scholarship can produce both (1) active citizens who participate in the development of their communities by claiming their rights, but also (2) concrete development projects that address the real needs of concerned communities.

The purpose of the paper is therefore to assess how the prominence of institutions of higher education can be activated in facilitating processes of transferring knowledge, creating awareness on socio-economic and political rights and facilitating participation for socio-economic development in South Africa. As a conceptual review, the paper explores both the engaged and the activist scholarship approaches as catalysts of socio-economic development. Considering the importance of the two approaches the paper suggests: firstly, a generic model with four key principles proposed by Van den Ven (2007) as a starting point for engaged scholarship initiatives in South Africa and secondly, an activist scholarship approach grounded into seven principles by Came et al. (2015) to support, effect and convert South African universities into a spaces where the academia and communities mutually engage through various collaborative interventions for the greatest public benefit, thus, contributing to socio-economic development.

2. Conceptualising the “Engaged Scholarship” Approach

The “Engaged Scholarship” approach also referred to as “Community-engaged Scholarship or “Scholarship of Engagement” (terms used interchangeably in this paper) was first introduced by Ernest Boyer in United States in the mid nineteen nineties (Shultz & Kajner, 2013).

According to Sandmann (2008, p. 92), the concept of “Scholarship of Engagement” (SOE) has evolved, becoming differentiated into multifaceted fields such as outreach, public service, civic engagement, community engagement, participatory action research, and even socio-economic development. This explanation translates the definition of Boyer (1996, p. 11) that: “...*the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral*

problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement". Boyer (1996), relates the concept "Scholarship of Engagement" with regards to the re-conceptualisation of scholarship as discovery, integration, application, and teaching.

Kajner and Shultz (2013) define the term "Engaged Scholarship" through two key notions: engagement and disengagement. Referring to the 2005 Commission on Community-Engaged Scholarship in the Health Professions, the authors emphasise that it is crucial for institutions of higher education to understand what engaged scholarship is in order to promote an effective community-engaged scholarship. They argue that some institutions of higher education have demonstrated the lack of a consistent understanding of what they were meant to achieve through engaged scholarship. It is therefore paramount to define the engagement of both the institutions of higher education and communities (what each brings to the table according to the authors) for an engaged scholarship programme to thrive. The authors refer to a scholarship of doing it (concrete action) rather than talking about doing it as a scholarship that is engaged. An engaged scholarship is therefore a scholarship that is based on committed engagements that yield mutual and reciprocal benefits.

Defining engagement relies also on the planning of the disengagement of both university students and scholars who engage with the communities. Student detachment can be either in terms of interest and attention in educational settings or in terms of leaving institutions of higher education altogether argue Kajner and Shultz (2013). Students and scholars need to be part of the lifeworld of community they work with. At the time of completing their studies (students) or their assignments (scholars), the disengagement should be well negotiated in order to preserve and sustain the achievements of the engagement scholarship programmes. These notions are not the focus of this paper, yet, they are good topics for future research.

Boyer (1990) argues that the academic part of scholarship of engagement is composed of four main types: (1) The *scholarship of discovery* which incorporates the traditional view of research as a way to uncovering new knowledge; (2) The *scholarship of teaching* or the transformation and extension of knowledge through the interaction between the understanding of the teacher and the learning of students; (3) The *scholarship of application* which covers community service and includes the application of knowledge between academics and the "real world" or engagement; and (4) The *scholarship of integration* which links and combines knowledge across different disciplines.

Zuber-Skerritt, Wood and Louw (2015, p. 4) argue that: "*...the main purpose of an engaged scholarship in higher education, which includes the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) genre, is to conduct rigorous, systematic inquiries to improve learning, teaching, research and community engagement, and to disseminate the findings in accepted scholarly format to add to the existing body of knowledge*".

Being an academic theory, engaged scholarship can be both complicated and not easy to implement. In South Africa, the direct impact of the engaged scholarship is yet to be demonstrated as analysed in the this paper.

3. The South African Context of Engaged Scholarship

The first South Africa's engaged scholarship programme was recently launched at the University of Cape Town in May 2015, making it a new field with limited publications and thus needing further research. It is however important to stress that the Department of Education, launched the Community—Higher Education—Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative in 1999 based on the 1997 White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education. The aim of the initiative was to assist South African higher education institutions to conceptualise and implement community engagement as a core function of the academy according to Kitching (2016, p. 144). A convincing argument of Zuber-Skerritt, Wood and Louw (2015) is that the rapid change in the higher education sector in South African prompts an alternative paradigm of learning, teaching, research, knowledge creation, and action leadership. Academics are therefore not capacitated to take the challenge of implementing SOE. They need assistance and professional development to be ready to implement effective SOE according to Kitching (2016). South African universities are bound to restructure their engaged scholarship programmes through capacitating and empowering academics to lead the engaged scholarship initiatives.

For Sandmann (2008, pp. 94-98) the term “Scholarship of Engagement” is based on four punctuations. The four punctuations are used as the basis of the problem statement of this paper:

- 1) “Engagement defined” refers to the work of early authors on the scholarship of engagement whereby organisational leaders substantiated the need for the engagement of higher education institutions with the communities they serve and fund. Citing authors such as Magrath (1999), Ramaley (1997) and Votruba (1996), Sandmann (2008) emphasises their acknowledgement of the historical legacy of higher education's outreach in the form of the cooperative extension service and other venues. In South Africa, the involvement of organisational leaders to claim the need of SOE is not traceable. This paper argues therefore that SOE seems to be a one-way process led by institutions of higher education. Thus, the need to involve not only organisational leaders but the communities at large.
- 2) “Engagement as teaching and research” meaning conceptualizing the scholarship of engagement by uncoupling engagement from service, public service, or outreach in its many forms—cooperative extension, technology transfer, economic development, continuing and extended education, and so on. Sandmann (2008) considers SOE as service-learning or an instructional pedagogy through some types of applied, participatory action and community-based research. One key missing element alluded too by the author and which is the concern of this paper is the relationship between such teaching and research and knowledge generation from public participation.
- 3) “Engagement as a scholarly expression” punctuation concerns how institutional civic engagement and the scholarship of engagement have evolved over time as the two main tracks of theory and practice of SOE. Sandmann (2008) reflects the importance of the individual history, priorities, circumstances, and location of institutions of higher education and their impact on the communities they are meant to serve. For the authors, such importance and impact justify two basic principles of the scholarship of engagement: (1) mutual benefit and reciprocal partnerships between the academe and the

community and, (2) the integration of teaching, research, and service. Demonstrating the value of the application of the mutual benefits and reciprocity and engagement in the case of South Africa is not easily possible, thus the need to review the applicability of these two basic principles in the case of South Africa.

4) “Engagement institutionalised” as a punctuation addresses issues relating to the institutionalisation of the SOE within and across academe according to Sandmann (2008). The author highlights issues such as institutional cultures based on traditional scholarship; development of institutional frameworks to identify and support engagement and so forth. Such issues should be ironed out so as to permit institutions of higher education to (1) thoroughly address the demands of the community for more social engagement. As for the case of the first punctuation, institutionalising SOE in South Africa has been or could be a difficult mission in the considering its apartheid regime and the segregation policies and practices of the past. The racial and cultural differences and the domination of institutions of higher education by the white minority whereas the citizenry and communities are largely composed by blacks create a dilemma. Establishing how can such imbalance be addressed for SOE to benefit both the institutions of higher education and the communities is very important. For Fourie (2006, p. 14), from the South African political context, the term community has vague concept and often refers to the “local township” or “the black community”. This dependency of white dominated institutions of higher learning vs. black majority communities to benefit from engaged scholarship is a dilemma that needs to be resolved for engaged scholarship to be successful.

The above quick review concludes that none of the four punctuations explaining the term scholarship of engagement is observed in the implementation of scholarship of engagement programmes in South Africa although at an initial stage. The practice of scholarship of engagement in South Africa needs to be reviewed in order to observe the four punctuations. Such task is crucial, yet not the focus of this paper. The paper acknowledges the importance of observing these punctuations for the success of scholarship of engagement in South Africa. It sets the scenario whereby the four punctuations are observed in order to focus on its purpose, how can engaged and activist scholarship promote human rights for socio-economic development.

4. Toward an Effective Scholarship for Socio-Economic Development in South Africa

Engaged scholarship and activism scholarship are not yet effectively conceptualised by the institutions of higher education and practically implemented in South African communities. It is arguable that the notion of community engagement has primed over that of engaged scholarship in South Africa for various reasons. Fourie (2006) for instance, questions the essence of the foundation of engagement considering the intrinsic nature of the institutions of high education within the changing demands. He refers to the continuity within change in the higher education system. The author who was the vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State, argues that whether engaged scholarship belongs to an institution of higher education (university), or whether it distracts a university from its “core

business” is a key issue in the debate on community engagement and community service. Such issue prompts questions on what a university is and whether it is appropriate, or not, for a university to implement scholarship of engagement programmes according to Fourie (2006).

Another reason for the failure of the emergence of engaged scholarship in South Africa is the confusion between community engagement, community service and scholarship of engagement. In the case of the University of the Free State for example, although some ambiguous references are made regarding scholarship of learning programmes, the only visible structure is the department of community engagement and service learning. The few cases of scholarship of learning programmes in South Africa are not supported by a government policy or law. The strategy in use currently is the “Community—Higher Education—Service Partnerships” (CHESP) initiative of the Department of Education. CHESP was established in 1999 under the 1997 White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education. It is therefore necessary to consider the development and implementation of policies and strategies as part of reconceptualising engaged scholarship in South Africa. This initiative needs therefore a revision and the development of strategies and programmes for its effectiveness.

To introduce an effective engaged scholarship and activist scholarship it is important to adopt a generic model as suggested by Van de Ven (2007). The success of such model can prompt a supportive activist scholarship resulting in socio-economic development.

5. Generic Engaged Scholarship Model

There are many challenges that impede the success of engaged scholarship. Some have already been stated in this paper. Van de Ven (2007), highlights three important challenges that still current in the case of South Africa. Firstly, the author alludes to the gap between theory and practice of engaged scholarship (a dual challenge). In his words, Van de Ven (2007) observes that academics put your theories into practice whereas managers put your practice into theory. The second challenge is the fact that social research is not used for practice or science. The third challenge is that the evidence-based practices are often not implemented.

To deal with these challenges this paper suggests that a generic engaged scholarship model be adopted in South Africa where the practice of engaged scholarship approach is still recent. The model developed by Van den Ven (2007) is more applicable and adaptable for South Africa.

This model observes four key principles:

- 1) It is a form of inquiry whereby researchers involve others and leverage their different perspectives to learn about a problem domain. This principle implies collaboration not only between institutions of higher education but also between institutions of higher education and communities as well as other role-players.
- 2) The relationship between the role-players should involve negotiation, mutual respect, and collaboration to produce a learning community. This principle prioritises the involvement of all role-players as equal partners.

- 3) Make use of many ways to practice engaged scholarship such as to study complex problems with academics, practitioners and other stakeholders, thus cementing partnership, ownership and responsibility.
- 4) Promote an identity of how scholars or academics view their relationships with their communities, academics, practitioners and students. This principle will facilitate clarity with regards to roles and responsibilities.

The scholarship of learning process by Van den Ven (2007) promotes the increase of the likelihood of advancing knowledge for science and profession through the engagement of the academics, practitioners and other stakeholders in four steps of any study:

- 1) Ground problem/question in reality up close and from afar. During this step, pertinent questions such as: what is the research problem at hand and the questions to respond to? Who needs to be address? What needs to be done? Where does the problem happen? When does it happen? Why does it happen? and How does it happen?
- 2) Develop alternative theories to address the question. The engaged scholarship should focus on the proposed answer to the research question and clarify whether such answer is any better than the status quo or a competing plausible alternative answer.
- 3) Collect evidence to compare models of theories. This step empirical issues of the proposed answer should be analysed and clarified through a relevant research design for data gathering, analysis and interpretation. Focus should also be put on the persons and institutions to engage in the study (whom and with whom is the study conducted and who's point of view should be considered).
- 4) Communicate and apply findings to address the problem/question. Clarity on how to communicate and use the study findings is important. Focus on how to communicate, interpret and use findings with intended audience is also a key element to consider.

6. Activist Scholarship for Awareness and Participation for Socio-economic Development

The human rights approach to socio-economic development is being promoted especially by the United Nations following the failure of economic policies to address poverty in many developing states. Three characteristics are important to underline when it comes to the importance of the human rights approach to socio-economic development according to Jonson (2003). Firstly, human rights are universal and indivisible as per the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Secondly, the aim of the human rights approach is human development as all people live in communities. The other characteristic of human rights is that they are inalienable, meaning that they cannot be taken away. Safeguarding human rights against violations, abuse, or neglect is therefore paramount because human rights are indisputable in promoting human development and socio-economic development for the purpose of this paper.

These three characteristics above emphasise the importance of the active participation of communities at all levels in the decision-making processes affecting their lives. The engaged scholarship dimension

is therefore necessary at this stage to facilitate the implication of the academics in the research, planning and implementation of actions, together with communities and other role-players in addressing the needs of that community.

However, poor and marginalised communities are often unaware of their basic rights, what such rights entail and how to claim them. Such ignorance prevents the participation of communities in the decision making, planning and implementation of socio-economic development processes. In the case of an effective engaged scholarship, adding the activist scholarship approach becomes necessary to raise awareness within the community about people's rights and responsibilities and the importance of their participation in decision making, planning and implementation of socio-economic development processes. Guajardo, Guajardo and Locke (2016) refer to the concept of activist scholarship as a work of activist scholars and community activists in facilitating socio-economic development.

Came, Macdonald and Humphries (2015) situate activism within the social movement paradigm. They argue that activism occurs across the full range of the political spectrum and can be a means to express public dissatisfaction and to act against those perceived to perpetrate social injustice (Came et al., 2015, p. 15). Through activism, a group of people or even a mass population considered as protestors, organise themselves to claim their rights or oppose repressive or regressive policies in order to provoke social change. Activism happens in various ways especially demonstrations, sit-ins, public meetings, riots, petitions, and other civil disobedience activities and acts to defy the law and order.

Craig Calhoun, cited by Hale (2008), provides an extensive explanation of activist scholarship. He considers activist scholarship as not simply applying previously accumulated knowledge but mostly as part of the process of forming, testing, and improving knowledge. For him, activist scientists need to offer the truth because scholarly knowledge has no authority, if it doesn't justify that some courses of action are either riskier, less reliable or better than others and demonstrate the distinctive values of such courses of action. However, it is important to know that the authority of scholarly knowledge is not and usually cannot always be perfect. He then cautions that activist researchers learn an enormous amount from the community activists with whom they collaboratively work. They are therefore not the only ones to be knowledgeable although they have the capacity of leading the scientific analysis and interpretative and conceptual work. The notion of complementarity is therefore key for the success of activist scholarship programmes.

Complementarity encourages studies in which the activist research scholar adopts the life of other community activists and engages permanently in the daily life of the concerned. The active engagement of the activist scholar should therefore concern both the political and social complementarity in the research and activist action gives voice to participants, privileges the issues important to them, and explores practical applications of scholarship within participating communities and organisations.

Activist scholarship is, according to Came et al. (2015, p. 43), research that is performed with the intention to achieve social justice agendas by challenging current hegemonic power relations. This paper agrees with Came et al., 2015, p. 43) and supports the definition of Hale (2008, p. 7) that:

“activist scholars have diverse focuses, ideas and inspirations but have shared political sensibilities that reflect a commitment to social justice that is attentive to inequalities of race, gender, class and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them”.

The paper further supports the following explanation of Craig Calhoun that: *“...activist scholarship is a matter of critique, not just advocacy. It is part of a project of producing new knowledge, of integrating more abstract and universal sorts of knowledge with more concrete and particular sorts of knowledge, and of keeping action and its possibilities at the center of attention”* (Hale, 2008, p. xxv).

From the above understanding of activism, engaged scholarship and activist scholarship, it is evident that both engaged scholarship and activist scholarship are needed to promote social justice and facilitate socio-economic development in South Africa. Came et al. (2008, p. 44) emphasise that: *“Rather than producing research outputs, some activists want ‘all hands-on deck’ to support urgent struggles to alleviate oppression. Others saw the university and activist scholars as an opportunity to have activists in paid positions with useful access to resources and information. Thus placed, scholars can use these roles to theorise, analyse, generate evidence, and translate complex information into usable formats. Academics can also draw on their expertise as appropriate to support new activists in a mutually beneficial relationship. They can also broker networks and information, bringing people together to advance social justice agendas”.*

It is therefore important to discuss how engaged and activist scholarship can be implemented in South Africa and impact on social justice to foster socio-economic development. The paper attempts to respond to such important predicament.

The principles and process of the engaged scholarship model by Van den Ven (2007) is a good starting point in promoting the maximisation of engaged scholarship programme in South Africa before attempting proper activist scholarship paradigm. A critical addition to this model is to adapt the seven principles proposed by Came et al. (2015, pp. 44-46) as foundations of activist scholarship. The authors maintain and warn that these principles overlap and that it is not necessary for all of them to be applied in a research or action for it to be an activist scholarship but recommend that many of them be present to augment the possibility of consciously reaching an active scholarship. The seven principles are briefly explained and adapted (to the case of South Africa) below:

- 1) To promote an inclusive social justice for both people and the planet. This principle responds to the relentless of activist scholars to pursue fairness and equity through social justice in the case of New Zealand. The authors emphasise global social justice in a holistic way that considers an interconnection between the health and wellbeing of the mother earth and her human inhabitants, meaning to secure justice for the people and for the planet equally.
- 2) To work with activists to challenge existing power relations. This principle emphasises a scholarship that exposes and challenges existing unequal power gaps as a priority. The principle prioritise collaboration between scholars and community activists for the success of activism.

- 3) Scholarship and action to be informed by intergenerational knowledge. The importance of building on existing engaged scholarship programmes and the work of community activist is important. and entering into dialogue with activist elders. Constant dialogue with elders and local activists is important as some or most of their actions might not be documented. Scholars must therefore live closer and be in regular contact with the communities they work with and preserve and build from the accountability of existing social movements.
- 4) To emphasise political struggle and critique and/or to build radical communities. Activist scholarship should be both critique and challenge that abusing power and consequently build new radical communities.
- 5) To gather credible evidence and powerful stories to inform activism. Social change should move people, engage them and shift and challenge their perception of the way things happen and how social change should happen. Activist scholars should generate strong and credible quantitative and/or qualitative evidence to stand up against hostile political scrutiny. to inform debate.
- 6) To reject objectivity and embrace ethical and political complexity. Activist scholarship should reject the positivistic notion of objectivity and therefore avoid easy ideological positions to practise political and ethical complexity. They must pursue complexity in order to diffuse accusations of bias from those protecting the regime in place.
- 7) To form and sustain a robust research process and concrete social change outcomes. The ethical commitment to strong research that will defeat political and scholarly scrutiny is very important. Activist scholarship should contribute to concrete political outcomes to be defined with activist communities.

7. Conclusion

Debating the impact of scholarship on socio-economic development in South Africa is premature as the concept has not yet been implemented to a scale of an assessment. Although some levels of engaged scholarship have taken place, the activist scholarship approach remains more ambiguous yet worthy of being discussed and considered if South Africa considers using its universities for collaborative programmes that uplift the conditions of the population through social justice and social change leading to socio-economic development.

Implementing activist scholarship in South Africa is extremely important, yet a work-in-progress at the current stage. This paper has initiated a debate that is formed by three critical ideas. The first idea is that, the success of engaged scholarship and activist scholarship can be facilitated by the willingness of the universities and other concerned organisations to reconceptualise engaged scholarship and activist scholarship. Implementing the four punctuations of Sandmann (2008, pp. 94-98) in the engaged scholarship programmes is the initial step towards their success.

The second idea is that a generic model such as that of Van den Ven (2007) is crucial to facilitate the practice and processes of engaged scholarship programmes in South Africa. The third idea is that, once

the two first ideas are implemented, the seven principles of Same et al. (2015) are essential in facilitating the relationships of collaboration, mutual benefit and trust between the activist scholars and community scholar for a strong activism that bring about social change for socio-economic development.

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