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Establishing a faculty community engagement unit: a case study from built environment

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This paper proposes that the cluster of disciplines that constitutes the built environment is well placed to demonstrate an approach to scholarship that aligns the educational and inquiry activities of the university with social engagement and application.

The paper begins by connecting the organisational, epistemological and pedagogical implications of Boyer's scholarship of engagement model. It then provides a case study of a unique unit within the Faculty of Built Environment at the University of New South Wales. Established in 2005, the FBEOtherThere! unit consolidates the community engagement and outreach activities of the Faculty of the Built Environment. It facilitates community interaction with the educational and research resources of the Faculty and the University through designing faculty courses that provide students with a service-learning experience while they work in interdisciplinary project contexts on challenging social issues identified by communities. The unit also undertakes research projects driven by community concerns.

The development of this unit attempts to position community engagement at the intersection of organisational, epistemological and pedagogical values. The purpose in writing this paper is to illuminate for others the experience of establishing a faculty engagement unit that realises the challenge of implementing Boyer's vision for the scholarship of engagement.

Keywords: scholarship, learning and teaching, community engagement.

Introduction

Despite the fact that universities have been obliged to be more publicly accountable in recent years, it seems they have also become increasingly disengaged from real-world issues, student needs and learning experiences. A narrow, self-referential approach to accepted scholarship, practice and research outcomes has accentuated this disengagement. This situation was observed with deep concern by Ernest Boyer and his colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who feared that society was fast losing confidence in universities as institutions of *vita activa* (Arendt, 1958), perceiving them as increasingly socially irrelevant (Braxton, Luckey & Helland, 2002).

Boyer argued that a new model of scholarship – the scholarship of engagement – was needed if universities were to revitalise their proper mission as institutions of civic leadership and social engagement. This model requires and drives critical transformation within universities, as they grapple with the ideological and functional complexities of responding to and implementing the scholarship of engagement.

This paper connects the organisational, epistemological and pedagogical implications of Boyer's scholarship of engagement model. It then provides a localised example of this process of transformation through a case study of a unique management unit within a Faculty of Built Environment in a research-intensive university.

The scholarship of engagement

Boyer's (1990) visionary scholarship model of discovery, teaching, application and integration challenged the traditional research–teaching dichotomy. Boyer was disheartened by the slowness of institutional change, however, and was also keen to distinguish a notion of engaged scholarship from a more conventional 'one-way' transaction in which university experts participate in 'citizen service' outreach activities (Ramaley, 2005; Braxton, Luckey & Helland, 2002). He therefore expanded his model to include the scholarship of engagement, which embeds and connects the other four dimensions in a search for collaborative ways to address pressing social, civil, economic and moral problems (Boyer, 1996).

For Boyer, engagement went beyond service or outreach. It is the purposeful direction of disciplinary knowledge, student learning, individual academic expertise and institutional organisation towards solving social problems and assisting communities in need. This generates shared knowledge, which in turn focuses research agendas for the scholarships of discovery and integration, as well as generating inquiry-based student learning experiences within the scholarship of teaching.

Zille (2007) has commented that the status of some elite universities has traditionally been enhanced the more disengaged they are from real-world issues. In contrast, Boyer's scholarship of engagement challenges the research and publication approach rewarded by these universities at the same time as it focuses society's expectation that premier public universities articulate how their conceptions of scholarship, research and teaching practices benefit the public good.

In many ways, Boyer's model remains true to a basic understanding of what it means to be a scholar. It values shared, open and critical discussion validated by peer review, as well as discovery, creativity and imagination (Andresen, 2000; Diamond & Adam, 2004). On the other hand, it challenges entrenched, introspective epistemological traditions of disciplinary knowledge.

Epistemology

Schön (1995, 34) contended that a revitalised conception of scholarship required a new epistemology that differs from the dominant discourse of technical rationality and what he called 'institutional epistemology'. Building on his model of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987), Schön (1995) argued for the alignment rather than hierarchy of theory, research and practice in this new epistemology. He proposed that 'this form of knowledge springs from a process entailing first the delineation of a problematic situation and then the development of strategies for possible solutions to the problem' (Braxton, Luckey & Helland, 2002, 22–23). This shifts the emphasis from knowledge generated and tested in the academy to that formulated in context; from an assessment focus on the validity of results to an interest in their effectiveness in action; from the academic as unchallenged expert to the academic as collaborator in knowledge-making (Schön, 1995; Rice, 2002).

Gibbons' (2007) vision of a 'Mode 2 society' realises aspects of Schön's epistemology:

The once clear lines of demarcation between government, industry and universities, between science of the universities and the technology of industry, between basic research, applied research and product development, between careers in academe and those in industry seems no longer to apply ... In sum, the major institutions of society have been transgressed as each has crossed into one another's terrain (Gibbons, 2007, 22).

He argues that, in response to social uncertainty and complexity, society increasingly demands innovative, co-evolved knowledge produced in what Gibbons calls the '*agora*' – the public square of political assembly. In the *agora*, multiple transaction spaces exist for the 'public speech' of framing and defining social and scientific questions and problems and negotiating their solutions. In these *agora* transactions, an engaged university demonstrates its 'social embeddedness'.

Pedagogy

From its transactions in the *agora*, the university ideally generates a new capacity to construct educational experiences for its students that recognise and develop their humanity and that prepare them for careers of lifelong learning, active agency and capability as world citizens in a 'cosmopolitan' society. Nussbaum argues that higher education should develop students' ability to see themselves as bound to all other human beings 'by ties of recognition and concern in a global world' (Nussbaum, 1997 quoted in Walker, 2006). Therefore, educational experiences should develop in them in the capacity 'to imagine what the world looks like from the perspective of others' (Arendt, 1977 quoted in Walker, 2006).

We propose that this is one way of shaping a scholarship of engagement and meeting society's need for citizens who are able to engage in knowledge production as part of a negotiated and evolving partnership between the academy and local and global communities for the benefit of others. The next part of this paper outlines how this intersection between epistemology and pedagogy takes shape in the Australian context.

Conceptualising community engagement in Australian universities

Generally founded as corporations under acts of state parliament and funded by the Commonwealth Government, it is expected that Australian universities carry out their activities in the best interests of the people (Meek & Hayden, 2005). How they conceptualise and honour society's trust in the form of engagement varies in meaning and practice according to their contexts and institutional ethos. A comparison of the strategic plans of

Australia's Group of Eight (Go8) bears this out. The Go8 is a coalition of self-designated 'leading universities'; they are generally older institutions and all are research-intensive (see www.go8.edu.au for more information). In seven of these institutions, a clearly articulated idea of community engagement appears in their strategic plans or university mission statements. Some have Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Pro-Vice-Chancellor positions related to this activity. One, the University of Queensland, has an active centre dedicated to community engagement as a vehicle for innovative research undertakings.

Beyond the Go8, the 31-member Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) has contributed to debate and action on engagement modes, practices and scholarship conceptions since its inauguration in 2002. Through regular position papers, symposiums and conferences, the Alliance has advanced the scholarship of community engagement in the Australian context. It has also helped members to realise varying modes of engagement, often with particular impact in regional and rural communities (Winter, Wiseman & Muirhead, 2006). According to Professor Rob Wallis, AUCEA's national president, 'community engagement':

is now better defined as a two-way relationship leading to productive partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes. It is thus much more than community participation, community consultation, community service and community development. ... Community engagement is a scholarly activity in which a university's teaching and learning are integrated with research activities that involve the community as genuine partners (Willis, 2006, 2).

Interestingly, of the AUCEA membership, only four also belong to the Go8. This situation contrasts with the Campus Compact coalition in the United States, to which over 1000 university presidents have signed up, many of whom represent leading research universities such as California-Berkeley, Pennsylvania, Stanford, Harvard, Columbia and Princeton.

The University of New South Wales

Proudly research-intensive, the traditional strengths of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) are in the professional and scientific fields. A Go8 member, it does not belong to AUCEA. Neither does its mission contain a specific statement about community engagement. Indeed, the 2005 Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit report on UNSW recommended that:

UNSW identify the role it wishes community engagement to play in achieving its vision of being *Australia's leading international research university* and, having done so, develop a plan to recognize, support and evaluate relevant community engagement activities (AUQA, 2006, 44).

UNSW appears to have responded to this recommendation in its strategic planning. For example, *B2B Blueprint to Beyond 2010* (UNSW, 2007) takes up the issue of community engagement. But in this document, engagement is presented as a means of demonstrating expertise and generating external support for University activities – for example, through 'linkages and partnerships with donors, business and the professions, community organisations, government, academic and international bodies' and 'reciprocal relationships with alumni and former staff' (UNSW, 2007, 7). The high-level nature of the University's interpretation of community engagement means that staff who are committed to developing their teaching and research within the scholarship of engagement framework run the risk that their efforts will not be fully recognised within an institutional and epistemological framework that is still organised according to a traditional research–teaching dichotomy.

Theory and practice in action: a UNSW case study

The Faculty of the Built Environment (FBE) at UNSW is one of 10 faculties at UNSW. The FBE brings together a unique combination of disciplines and professional fields, and is one of the largest and most diverse faculties of its kind. Since 1998, the FBE has operated as a single-school faculty, offering professional and research degree programs in architecture, interior architecture, landscape architecture, industrial design, planning and urban development and building construction project management.

As professional disciplines that continuously interact with fields of practice, built environment disciplines have a well-established ethos of outreach through service and consultancy. Indeed, throughout its 50-year history, FBE has maintained strong relationships with various communities within the Sydney metropolitan region, throughout the state of New South Wales and more widely in the Pacific Rim. Its students are accustomed to project-based learning in the public domain and communication with communities. Over the years, however, numerous similar but unrelated community outreach, service and engagement activities had developed within the FBE.

On the other hand, the single-school, multidisciplinary structure of the FBE means that it is well placed to initiate interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning, teaching and research collaborations. These collaborations can align with the scholarship of integration domain, ‘making connections across the disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating non-specialists, too’ (Boyer, 1990, 18). They have the potential to allow both staff and students to respond to the increasingly complex issues facing contemporary society, which as Ramaley (2005, 19) notes, ‘do not come in “disciplinary form”’.

With this potential in mind, the Faculty initiated discussions that resulted in the establishment of the FBEOutThere! (FBEOT) in 2005. FBEOT is an outreach unit that links communities and their projects with FBE students and staff through elective interdisciplinary, service-learning design projects. It consolidates the FBE’s numerous community engagement activities and coordinates their flagship role in an emerging strategic direction for UNSW.

Establishment

The idea for FBEOT was originally proposed in 2004 by the Head of School (at that time) in consultation with the Faculty General Manager, in response to a growing awareness of the uncoordinated nature of community engagement activities within the FBE, described above. A Faculty reference committee involving representatives of the FBE executive and academic colleagues from almost all the FBE’s disciplinary programs guided FBEOT’s emerging rationale through a strategic planning process over a period of several months. The process was designed to be inclusive and to set the fundamental principles and protocols for how FBEOT would respond to potential community engagement activities. The process resulted in the determination to establish a discrete Faculty unit that would:

- sit between what Lombardi et al. (2004) call the administrative ‘shell’ and academic ‘core’ of the FBE
- identify, or respond to already identified, real-life, community needs by brokering, designing and/or facilitating courses in consultation with Faculty staff
- focus on educational activities that aligned with the FBE’s vision of synergised disciplines, and also to extend and engage students in cross-disciplinary or

interdisciplinary modes, particularly in projects that addressed issues confronting disenfranchised social groups (Corkery & Roche, 2005)

- be guided by the pedagogy of service learning.

Organisation and operation

As a discrete faculty unit, FBEOT, in operation, is managed by a non-academic staff member who reports to the FBE General Manager, and is staffed by an education coordinator, a project officer and a research assistant. It belongs neither to the administrative ‘shell’ nor to the academic ‘core’ (Lombardi et al., 2004) of the Faculty; rather, its independent status allows it to facilitate interactions between the two.

As an ‘administrative’ unit, it:

- identifies and liaises with communities with suitable projects
- identifies and liaises with appropriate academic staff
- organises meetings, site visits, field trips, consultations and other interactions between community stakeholders, academic staff and students
- produces resources and conducts presentations.

At the same time, it gives academic substance to the engagement processes and procedures of the faculty organisation (Harman & Treadgold, 2007), by:

- providing research assistance
- shaping course projects to meet both community needs and appropriate learning outcomes, and developing course outlines
- assisting academics and students alike to document their reflective feedback in post-project evaluation phases.

In these ways, FBEOT is a ‘permeable’ enterprise (Gibbons, 2007), akin to the transaction and trading spaces of the *agora* with a mandate and rationale for engagement.

Service learning

Situated outside the formal program structure and competency-focused pedagogies of the degree programs, FBEOT was developed with a focus on service learning. With its experiential and constructivist approach, service learning is a good ‘fit’ for the design studio learning and teaching environment, and built environment design students are well socialised to this mode of learning.

More importantly, the appropriateness of service learning as a pedagogy for community engagement is well recognised (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Subotzky, 1999; Ehrlich, 2006). This is because service learning engages students in organised activities that meet both real-life community needs as well as identified learning outcomes. Indeed, the learning outcomes of any service learning activity are associated with fostering students’ ability to use their disciplinary, classroom-based knowledge to solve community problems, and developing in students a set of values in which this kind of activity is highly prioritised.

The understanding of service learning underpinning FBEOT activity is based on a philosophical approach that attends to values and active citizenship. Martha Nussbaum’s notion of capability, which is framed by the thinking of philosopher Amartya Sen, is also important. For Nussbaum, capability involves taking ‘responsibility for our own lives and the consequences for and on others’ and acting so that ‘our capability for showing consideration

to others, for understanding them, for participating ethically in the human condition' is developed (Nussbaum, 2000, quoted in Walker, 2006, pp. 91–92).

Courses

In contrast to most other design studio courses in the FBE, on FBEOT community-based courses, students work on issues identified by a community group, on a real site, to conceptualise and develop a built environment response. At the same time, they expand their understanding of social responsibility and ethical practice within their own discipline, and in partnership with others. To date, FBEOT has facilitated four courses.

Learning landscapes, Point Clare Primary School NSW

In this elective course, students designed new play and learning environments for the grounds of Point Clare Primary School, on the central coast north of Sydney.

Drought conditions and poor drainage had rendered the school's main playground virtually unusable. The school wanted to transform this area into a 'learning landscape' – an external space to support formal and informal curriculum delivery, experiential learning, creative play, social interaction, and contact with nature. The FBE's Landscape Architecture program was asked to help with an application for funding from the Australian Federal Government's Investing in Our Schools initiative, and FBE staff saw the opportunity for a design studio elective.

Built environment design and planning students were involved in an intensive studio. Working in mixed teams, students prepared landscape masterplans and preliminary budgets, a draft funding application, and a draft environmental management plan. A design proposal by one of the teams accompanied the school's funding application, which was awarded the maximum grant amount of \$150,000. The students' design concepts were further developed by a landscape contractor for construction.

FBEOT provided resource materials on education for sustainability and systems thinking.

Clubhouse project, Wollongong NSW

The Wollongong Clubhouse Project is a community initiative to build a facility for people with schizophrenia. The initiative is associated with the International Centre for Clubhouse Development (ICCD), which promotes programs and services to give people living with mental illness access to friendship, housing, education and employment. The ICCD model is unique, so the Wollongong project proponents sought a unique means of realising the project.

Built environment design and planning students worked together in a 14-week design studio elective to prepare proposals for the Clubhouse design. The process included two half-day workshops with the local council, the program proponents, and the carers and 'consumers'. The students prepared a project brief, which reflected the ICCD's standard requirements for facilities, Wollongong's local planning requirements, and stakeholder requests for special features.

Initially, three proposals were developed for the building and site. After receiving feedback on the schemes, students worked collaboratively to present one design proposal with supporting documentation. Their work was refined by a local architect for submission to Council. When completed, Wollongong's Clubhouse will be one of the few purpose-built ICCD Clubhouse facilities in the world.

FBEOT was responsible for client liaison, development of course content, ongoing resource support for studio leader and students, and the course evaluation survey. Student reflections on the outcomes of the course were positive as indicated by the following student comment:

The diversity of students gives you a greater range of expertise, so the work is more complete in a sense. The teamwork also allowed for a lot of cross communication and critical analysis of ideas, and working collaboratively for the best final outcome, compared to a more introspective analysis in a studio.
(Student, 2006 Wollongong project course)

Agape school and accommodation project, Uganda

This project developed a proposal for a school and accommodation centre for HIV/AIDS orphans on a site north of Uganda's capital, Kampala. The project began with a two-day charrette in which practitioners and students developed preliminary masterplan concepts. These ideas were further developed in an intensive design studio, which provided the starting point for further concept development in a semester-length faculty elective.

Students in the most recent studio worked in interdisciplinary teams to develop the ideas generated in the charrette and intensive studio. They focused on further concept refinement for school buildings and classrooms, landscape development, appropriate technology for the site's infrastructure, and prospects for economic development to assist the project to become self-sufficient.

FBEOT facilitated the initial charrette and subsequent studios, which were collaborations between UNSW and ARUP, a global design and business consulting firm with a corporate commitment lending its technical expertise to projects of high social value. It was also responsible for course content development, presentations to classes on systems thinking, a resource library of materials on appropriate technologies for sustainable systems, and course evaluation.

Rural Community Wellbeing, Young NSW

This project connected FBE students with Lambing Flat Enterprises (LFE), a social enterprise community group that provides services for people with multiple intellectual disabilities in the south-western region of NSW.

Students designed homes to enable LFE's users to live independent and dignified lives in a familiar environment. Students consulted with the service users and staff, and visited service users' existing homes to understand their spatial needs and experiences. Literature reviews and site investigations were also an important part of the students' research and evidence gathering. The result was affordable designs that provide privacy and autonomy, room for personalisation and connection to external spaces.

An exhibition of the student designs gathered community feedback on the designs that best met users' needs. Six student designs were selected for master planning development in a subsequent interdisciplinary studio, and student design work is contributing to the community's efforts to attract government funding. In reflecting on the engagement process the community group commented that:

Studio workshops were mutually beneficial to both LFE and students. They demonstrated that students had developed a true understanding and empathy for people with challenged abilities – including an educated and intuitive grasp of

needs and desires. Facilitated knowledge exchange, relationship building, with LFE gaining a better understanding of the design process in general and students commitment to the project, were also major features of the studios. (2007 LFE Community Group feedback).

FBEOT was responsible for client liaison, development of course content, ongoing resource support for studio leader and students, and the course evaluation survey. Further FEOT reflection on this specific studio experience was recently published in a monograph journal of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Quinlan, Corkery and Roche, 2008).

Conclusions

In its first two years, FBEOT has distinguished the FBE from similar faculties in Sydney and across Australia. In constructing educational experiences that complement yet challenge conventional learning, it adds value and focus to students' preparation for their future careers. In investigating needs identified by communities, it has contributed to community capacity-building. Moreover, students and staff have collaboratively generated knowledge and understanding that contributes to scholarship and research productivity.

There are advantages and disadvantages in FBEOT's position in the faculty. The advantages include its ability to:

- respond to opportunities as they arise
- develop protocols for undertaking work that will best serve educational and community goals
- attract students and academics from any of the faculty's programs to participate in courses and other related activities.

As a result of this flexibility, FBEOT has facilitated new pathways in built environment teaching, learning and research – for example, interdisciplinary design studios.

The main disadvantage of the interstitial location of the unit is that it has an unclear relationship to the faculty's 'central business'. This becomes evident in operational aspects of faculty management such as workload allocation and recognition, and assignment of earned income for teaching and research activities. For individual academics, there is also the concern that the teaching undertaken in FBEOT courses or related research outputs will not be rewarded or considered a valid or mainstream contribution.

Ideally, where would a community engagement unit such as FBEOT sit in a university structure? It might seem best for it to have institutional imprimatur at the highest level and therefore to locate it in a Pro-Vice-Chancellor's or Deputy Vice-Chancellor's department. But the interaction between disciplines and communities must remain a primary consideration. Therefore, we believe that an FBEOT-type unit needs to be closely aligned with a faculty – that is, with the academics and students who are actively engaged in the projects being undertaken.

FBEOT demonstrates how a contextual organisational approach can embed the scholarship of engagement in disciplines with a predisposition for service learning, even in a highly traditional research-intensive university. For faculties that are keen to encourage continual

improvement in learning and teaching as well as expanded research outputs, such a unit presents a genuine vehicle for achieving both, through the teaching and learning associated with community-based design projects and the action research paradigms that can emanate from them.

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