

**The Community Futures Research Program at the University of Southern Queensland:**

**A Model for University-Community Engagement**

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**Community Engaged Research: Praxis and Transformation**

The nature of community engaged research can perhaps best be seen in its many manifestations; these range from participatory action research projects with community development outcomes, to community-initiated projects that invite the expertise of researchers in project design, implementation or evaluation. Smyth and Whitehead (2012), in discussing a community-engaged research project on Indigenous livelihoods in the Northern Territory, Australia, distinguish between 'research' and 'community development' as a way of making more transparent the differing imperatives governing each:

[W]e distinguish between *researching* Indigenous livelihoods on country and supporting the *development* of Indigenous livelihoods on country, while recognising that these two processes are closely linked; in some instances these processes may be distinguished by a difference of emphasis or intent, as much as practice. (pp. 11-12)

Emphasising a difference in intent, however, masks the often overlapping or common intents of researchers and those working in the area of community development, for example, in the cross-sectoral collaboration of researchers who are also activists. Such researchers must work not only across disciplines but also, using the example of human rights activists, "across all of the spheres where discussion of human rights take place" (Mackie, 2013, p. 299), and involve nonprofessional voices and perspectives (Kirmayer, 2013, pp. 367-368). They place priority not on peer-reviewed publications but on the 'adisciplinary' work of publishing for lay, professional, or policy audiences (Giacomini, 2004, as cited in Palmer & Carter, 2014, p. 37).

Researchers active in bringing about social change are engaged in a form of praxis, where "action happens in concert with reflection; it is a process of continually looking over our shoulders at how our actions are affecting the world" (Paulo Freire, as cited in Taylor, 1998, p. 18). Praxis is the transformative process that enables researchers to work in concert with community through projects that unfold through an iterative process, continually informed by practice (implementation in the community) and reflection (collaborative research). Transformation occurs not only through the specific changes sought by the community, but also in the participants themselves. Scholars of transdisciplinary research who seek to engage with and change the world have thus described three outcome spaces for such research:

1. An improvement within the 'situation' or field of inquiry.
2. The generation of relevant stocks and flows of knowledge, including scholarly knowledge and other societal knowledge forms, and making those insights accessible and meaningful to researchers, participants and beneficiaries.
3. Mutual and transformational learning by researchers and research participants to increase the likelihood of persistent change (Mitchell, Cordell, & Fam, 2015, p. 87).

The focus on praxis, social change, and respect for knowledge and perspectives outside the academy, suggest a form of community engaged research that is 'transformational' in Freire's sense, rather than 'exploitative' or 'transactional' (Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010, as cited in Danaher, Postle, & Burton, 2014, p. 19). To undertake such transformational community-engaged research requires a university culture where:

The institution must embed itself in the cause because it and its staff believe in it, without expecting any remunerative reward. The cause must have an ethical goal and the achievement of this community goal is the reward that is sought. The university adopts a 'good for' culture rather than a 'good at' culture and staff should not only be erudite thinkers ('good at') but also take on the role of applying the newly acquired knowledge through activism, advocacy, caring and so on ('good for') to the community that the university is engaging with. (Postle & Garlick, 2014, p. 41)

Engaging community with research helps to move both researchers and community members "away from excessive self-interest towards broader concerns and wider perspectives" (Postle & Danaher, 2014, p. 237). Like the 'adisciplinary' activists mentioned earlier, a community engaged researcher may require "more novel ideas about research or knowledge making – and knowledge using – than do academic-driven research and scholarship... Utility and relevance become descriptors of approbation, not of disdain" (Duke, 2014, p. 245).

### **An Imperative for Community-Engaged Research: USQ and its Region**

The Darling Downs region in Southern Queensland, Australia has historically depended on agriculture and associated industries. The main regional city is Toowoomba with a population over 125,000, and this is where the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has its main campus. Toowoomba is noted for its educational institutions including secondary schools and its Institute of Technical and Further Education. In recent years, mining and exploration for coal seam gas have changed the structure of regional communities, the labour force, the focus of investment and social expectations and aspirations. Other changes have arisen as a result of the region's location at the headwaters of the Murray-Darling Basin, one of Australia's most important environmental and agricultural water resources. As the distribution and pricing of water is changed to maintain a viable river system, agricultural businesses are likely to become no longer viable. Issues of economic and social resilience, including fostering of innovative economies, social cohesion and resourceful communities are, as Wilson and Hewitt (2014, pp. 53-54) note, "all questions of capacity building, with which universities and other educational institutions must engage".

Within this context, USQ developed its Community for Community (C4C) program to support the community transformations necessary for resilience in the face of economic, social and cultural change. While research and teaching at USQ has traditionally engaged the local community, the kind of community engaged research undertaken by researchers in the C4C program was different, part of:

... an additional category of activities that have typically operated on a modest budget that tend to 'sit out on their own' organisationally and that, while they can normally be linked in some way to learning and teaching or research, tend to have a

profile in the community that is principally based on their relationship with the community rather than on their academic role. (Postle & Garlick, 2014, p. 38)

The two projects described below constitute the core of the C4C program, and have now been absorbed into the work of the Community Futures strategic research program within the Institute of Resilient Regions of the University. *Collaboration* is the critical element of the C4C and Community Futures models, involving the public sector, the private sector and volunteer groups. "Its success has depended on establishing mutually beneficial partnerships" (Burton & Postle, 2014, p. 67), with the University serving as an equal partner in working collectively to foster and sustain positive change (Burton & Postle, 2014). In an iterative process or 'praxis', this collective work has generated "research outcomes that are particularly insightful and practical and that can feed directly into the programs and activities that are being studied" (Postle & Garlick, 2014, p. 38).

Some principles about community engagement as praxis have emerged from the work of C4C including:

- It involves an appreciation and mobilisation of knowledge, skills and community assets;
- It involves sustaining participation by community members to strengthen the knowledge and skills that lead to independence and support community to access these skills; and
- It involves the development of an interface arrangement whereby knowledge transfer and translation between the university and the community can occur (Cavaye, 2011, as cited in Postle & Garlick, 2014).

#### **Intergenerational learning projects.**

Projects underway exemplify this approach, and use theoretical and methodological tools from the humanities and social sciences to work with communities in building culture, confidence and identity. The shared intent of community members and researchers in these projects is to transform community attitudes and the future for each participant.

One particular project discussed here is focused on intergenerational learning and youth. Another community based project involves engaging community participants in storytelling approaches to document the narrative of their learning journeys.

The projects bring together the particular expertise of the C4C - now the Community Futures - team, and focus on enabling people to come together to discuss issues and identify solutions, empowering individuals and organisations to be resilient and to move forward with confidence. The projects involve an extensive network that is fully engaged in working together to develop the capacity of the Toowoomba and broader community.

#### ***Project 1: Intergenerational mentoring project: Toowoomba Flexi School.***

Toowoomba Flexi School is an alternative educational school for marginalised students who would otherwise not be able to attend mainstream schools. Youth who attend often come from disadvantaged backgrounds or may be dealing with mental health or drug related issues. Flexi School offers a more flexible schedule than a traditional school and provides a more personal and supportive environment, helping students gain self-esteem and re-engage in learning and society. There is also a strong emphasis on one-on-one career support for students at the school.

In 2009, a few people representing the Flexi School, The Older Men's Network (TOMNET), Rotary and USQ saw the wider possibilities of formally connecting the older men from TOMNET and the youth at Flexi School, who needed assistance with literary and language skills, including the ordinary skill of civil conversation. This led to the establishment of an intergenerational mentoring program.

The intergenerational mentoring program has been a huge success in Toowoomba; it underpinned the successful NAB Schools First national impact award in 2010 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-BsR2nc2dc>; <http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au/2010-schools/centenary-heights-state-high-school>) and provides evidence of a sustainable school and community partnership that is positively impacting on the lives of marginalised people.

The initial objectives of the mentoring program focussed on the development of oral and literacy skills. This has evolved into conversational activities in which students at the Flexi School get an opportunity to talk to an older person about matters they might raise or on matters introduced by the mentor. It is an opportunity for these students to find a sympathetic ear as well as learn from their mentor's own life experiences. The mentoring program is thus a mechanism for these young people to deal with the 'strains of acculturation', which in most cases are quite extreme (Yorkston & Postle, 2014, p. 136). The TOMNET mentors model critical social interactions through listening, constructive activity and showing respect and support (Yorkston & Postle, 2014, p. 136). For a mentor to be successful he or she has to learn to appreciate the particular sociocultural background of these students.

What we are beginning to see in these intergenerational partnering experiences is the formation of relationships that are mutually beneficial. There is evidence of a substantial emotional commitment by both parties to work together for an extended period of time for the purpose of personal development and learning. The students are relishing an introduction to an understanding of social character with its inconsistencies and contradictions (Yorkston & Postle, 2014). In contrast, the older people have practical knowledge, experience and wisdom they are eager to share with these young people. The older people also feel valued and experience a sense of belonging to the community (Yorkston & Postle, 2014).

The intergenerational mentoring program is a win-win relationship between disenfranchised youth and older people. The nationally recognised intergenerational mentoring program has achieved outstanding outcomes for both the marginalised older people and for the disenfranchised students. The older people have reported higher self-esteem, less depression and less suicide ideation. The program has been a major success for the students by contributing to higher levels of attainment, progression to employment or further education, reductions in smoking, increases in appropriate behaviour and, for both groups, an increase in self-esteem, confidence and feelings of self-worth. The students show a decrease in isolation, depression, suicide ideation, dropping out, and criminal and other anti-social activities. The project will evaluate the potential to roll out this program more broadly in other local communities and to make it available nationally via online delivery.

***Project 2: Clemente Toowoomba: Transforming lives through education.***

This project involves a collaborative partnership between USQ and St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland to offer the Clemente Toowoomba program at USQ in a supported blended learning

environment. The university education program provides resources and opportunities to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage and social isolation to build resilience, confidence and capacity to make changes in their lives. Throughout the 2 year program, students are fully enrolled as USQ students and engage with a university lecturer from the Open Access College in a community setting within a class with a maximum of 20 participants. Upon successful completion of the program, students will graduate with a USQ Certificate of University Studies, an accredited degree program of the University. Students will be assisted by “community mentors” who support and encourage the Clemente students to persist with their studies and who develop a relationship fostering self-esteem.

St Vincent de Paul Society is responsible for recruiting suitable mentors from the community to support Clemente students through their learning journeys. Mentors do not offer specific advice on assignments, or check or correct assignments; their role is designed to support and guide the Clemente students to determine answers for themselves and build their self-confidence. There are currently six Clemente students enrolled in the program in 2016, and six Community Mentors have been paired to work individually with each student over the course of the semester. Mentors typically have a qualification (TAFE or University) and extensive experience as a community volunteer.

Clemente students are typically marginalised due to their backgrounds (e.g. former refugees, people living with mental illness) and such groups are often left behind by national educational policies. The Clemente Toowoomba program is designed to support these people to participate in higher education; the program is designed to enable them to gain a university qualification (pre-degree) and thus raise aspirations for transforming their lives and their futures. The research project aims to evaluate the impact that participation in the Clemente Toowoomba program has on students’ self-confidence, self-efficacy, optimism, adaptability, occupational engagement and subjective levels of distress. The project involves interaction with students at a number of time points across their involvement and participation in Clemente Toowoomba at USQ.

Both of the projects described here can be seen to exemplify the principles of community engagement noted earlier. Firstly, the mentoring approach of both projects mobilises currently under-utilised skills and assets in the community. Secondly, each program is designed as a pathway promoting sustained participation that leads to independence. Finally, both programs provide an interface for knowledge transfer between the University and the community.

The outcomes of each program also sit within the three outcome spaces for change creation described above. This includes an improvement in outcomes for disenfranchised youth and other marginalised groups; contributions to research through publication and fostering research students; and via advancements in community forums and transformational learning by both participants and researchers.

### **Next Steps: What Does The Community Futures Program Offer That Is Unique?**

The work of the Community Futures team is based on collaboration - between social sciences and humanities scholars, and between these scholars and regional communities and organisations. As a team, the Community Futures researchers bring a unique combination of expertise and experience to their work with communities:

- Interdisciplinary insights from both the humanities and social sciences;
- Work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in regional and remote Australia;
- Ethnographic and narrative approaches to research;
- Cultural heritage and representations of the past;
- Site documentation; and
- Working with youth, older people and other marginalised groups in communities.

Because the Community Futures program is based in the humanities and social sciences, the team is able to engage with stories, shared experience, identity, culture and history – a convergence of place, culture and history in the lives of individuals and communities - to develop resilience and wellbeing.

Just as environmental history and ecocriticism are humanities-based expressions of “a renewed, reflective engagement with the physical world” (Griffiths, 2007), so too cultural heritage studies, anthropology, history, and ethnography can make us more reflective about the social, economic and political structures of communities. They enable communities to reflect upon their identity, the legacies of the past and the assets and barriers to change. Without understanding culture, where we come from, and our position in the here and now, we cannot see the possibilities yet to be explored, or have the confidence and solid ground from which to explore them. Such openness and confidence in addressing the future are the basis of human resilience and wellbeing.

## **Conclusion**

Vibrant communities that thrive in the face of sometimes extreme challenges, whether they be economic or cultural, are those that most effectively manage change from within. Community-led development depends on strong, interconnected networks, and building that capacity at a local level is the focus of USQ’s Community Futures research program. The Community Futures research program involves a team of USQ academics from a range of disciplines working in partnership with community leaders, service agencies, not-for-profit organisations and individuals.

The intergenerational learning projects described above, and the work of the Community Futures team in general, offer benefits to both the University and to regional communities. Key benefits for the community include:

- Access by the community to USQ expertise, resources and information networks in community capacity building and transforming for resilience;
- USQ partnering with the community to address identified issues and leverage external funding;
- Using evidence-based practice to develop a deep understanding of key social issues; and
- The encouragement of professionals and leaders in the community to undertake higher studies as a basis for consolidating and sharing their knowledge for the benefit of the community (see Burton & Postle, 2014, p. 67).

For the University, advantages include:

- Helping define a unique identity for USQ, generating networks to develop the modern ‘enterprise university’, and demonstrating good corporate citizenship;

- Providing expanded opportunities for research and scholarship, including increased postgraduate student enrolments;
- Providing a model for effective university-community engagement;
- Supporting the transformations necessary for the good health and development of the region; and
- Creating linkages between USQ activities and recognised government priorities (see Burton & Postle, 2014, p. 66).

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