
Available from Deakin Research Online: http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30005897

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2005, Australian Universities Quality Agency
Engaging Communities in Participation: Participation for What? For Whom? By Whom? And How?

Iain Butterworth\textsuperscript{a} and Josephine Palermo\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Vic 3125, Australia
\textsuperscript{b}Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Vic 3125, Australia

This paper is based on a workshop conducted at AUQF2005. This workshop was awarded Best Presentation.

This paper presents a theoretical frame and process that may be used to clarify purpose inherent in community engagement activities and strategies, and to evaluate progress against these criteria. Participation, empowerment and civic governance are themes of research and practice embraced by disciplines as diverse as health promotion, community psychology, community development and urban planning. Workshop participants were encouraged to reflect on their own practice in light of the theoretical models developed in these disciplines. In this way, the workshop helped promote understanding of the need – and opportunity – to develop interdisciplinary approaches to conceptualising, implementing and evaluating university-community engagement initiatives.

1. Introduction

Australian higher education is at a crossroads. Federal Education Minister, Brendan Nelson has embarked on a program of 'reform' – perhaps revolution – to steer higher education to a centralised, consolidated system. The very notion of what it means to be a university is now under discussion (see Guthrie, Johnston & King, 2004). In the haste to secure position in relation to research and teaching, the notion of community engagement and civic participation is in danger of being lost. Universities are facing numerous challenges, through the impacts of funding cuts, corporatisation, and international competition, a loss of student vitality and loss of community citizenship function (Ashton, 1998). Deakin University’s Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sally Walker has noted that,

...while Deakin is not opposed to the competition generated by overseas institutions operating in Australia or by private institutions that offer higher education awards, the Government must recognise that this competition will undermine the financial capacity of Australian universities to subsidise some programs and to engage in community service (2005, p. 1).

These changes could well be positive and creative if discussed, planned and implemented collaboratively with all stakeholders. However, if enacted in haste, they could lead to a heightening of the sense of insecurity, frustration and potential burnout amongst academic staff. They could also weaken the broader civic role played by universities in communities, towns and cities.

1.1 Applying Healthy Cities theory to universities

The World Health Organisation’s Healthy Cities approach provides governing principles and a course of action for universities to promote civic life, social capital and well-being. This approach is characterised by a broad-based, intersectoral political commitment to health and well-being in its broadest ecological sense. It includes a commitment to innovation and democratic community participation, resulting in policies that intrinsically promote health and quality of life (WHO, 1995). Since the Healthy Cities approach was adopted by WHO in 1986, more than 7,000 cities, municipalities, islands and other communities worldwide have embraced this approach (National Civic League, 1998).

Parallels can be drawn between cities and universities in the WHO definition of a healthy city.

A healthy city [or university] is one that is constantly creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to mutually support
each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing their maximum potential (Hancock & Duhl, 1988, p. 24).

Typically, a Healthy Cities approach is achieved by establishing an intersectoral working party to develop a unified vision and strategic plan for promoting health and well-being. The working party includes stakeholders from across the political, economic, cultural and intellectual life of the city. Universities already have these relationships in place, suggesting: (i) that Healthy Cities processes are easily generalisable to the tertiary education sector, and (ii) that universities are key stakeholders and partners in any broad-based approach to socially and ecologically sustainable urban and regional development (Tsouros, Dowding, Thompson & Dooris, 1998).

Universities... have the intellectual capacities, the skills, the authority and the credibility for this purpose. Universities are also a valuable resource for the communities in which they are located. Investing in the health promoting university is above all an investment in the future (Tsouros, 1998, p. 11).

The landmark Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion, the platform on which Healthy Cities and the companion Health Promoting Universities program are based, defined health promotion as the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health, through: (i) creating supportive environments; (ii) strengthening community actions; (iii) developing personal skills; (iv) reorienting health services; and (v) building healthy public policy (WHO, 1986). Clearly, universities have a role to play across all of these domains, not only in terms of promoting health and well-being and civic engagement on campus, but also in driving teaching and research that better enables communities to participate in action that enhances their own health and well-being. In this regard, 'real' participation is key.

Participation has been defined as a process in which people “take part in decision making in the institutions, programs and environments that affect them” (Heller, Price, Reinhartz, Riger & Wandersman, 1984, p. 339). By participating in the decision making of the institutions that affect them, people have been shown to help make improvements to their community, develop stronger social relationships, and increase their individual and collective sense of confidence and political power (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). Having the opportunity to participate in civic life has been identified as a core human need, and essential to the psychological health of individuals and communities (Berkowitz, 1996; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Meaningful community participation in decision making on issues has been shown to be important to: (i) uphold the notion of participatory democracy, (ii) the effectiveness of the planning process and the quality of the planning outcomes, (iii) improve the quality of, and validate, political decision making (Butterworth & Fisher, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Participation is central to the notion of university-community engagement (Winter, Wiseman & Muirhead, 2005). Whether in relation to encouraging stakeholder involvement in teaching and research, involving industry and employers in curriculum, or in upholding the notion of universities as good neighbours and corporate citizens, it is assumed that universities will embrace participation as a bedrock strategy for engaging communities. Despite the inherent feel-good nature of the term, however, participation can mean many different things to different people, depending on the context and the relative social power of the stakeholders and institutions involved.

In a landmark urban planning paper, Arnstein (1969) identified the importance of differentiating between ‘empty rituals’ of participation, on the one hand, and citizens having real power needed to affect the outcome of the process, on the other. She conceptualised participation as a ladder or spectrum, embracing a range of activities: from manipulation and therapy, the lowest forms of ‘non-participation’, through to informing, consultation and placation (degrees of tokenism); and up the ladder to degrees of citizen power in the form of partnership, delegated power and full citizen control. Butterworth and Fisher (2001) adapted Arnstein’s ladder to show how urban developers and other decision makers might employ notions of participation, depending on their ideological position. Parallels to university-community partnerships readily can be discerned (see Figure 1).
Participation in civic life can also range from officially-sanctioned image management to radical, pluralist, illegal civic unrest (Mouffe, 1992). In embarking on participatory community engagement, the question that must be asked is this: what forms of participation do universities have in mind, and for what purpose?

2. Workshop Process

The next section describes processes employed during a workshop conducted at AUQF2005, and examples of responses by participants. We engaged some 35 participants (quality assurance managers in universities from across Australia, India, Malaysia, New Zealand and other countries) to engage in reflection, values clarification and discussion. Core to emancipatory adult learning, these processes have been used to great effect in helping people achieve personal and community empowerment by "...mak[ing] sense of and act[ing] upon the personal, social, occupational and political environment in which they live" (Brookfield, 1986, p. vii). In a supportive group learning environment, values clarification can assist participants to expose their assumptions, ideological positions, attitudes and beliefs, and to find new pathways for action based on socially critical insight (Butterworth & Fisher, 2001; Foley, 1995; Freire, 1970; Paterson, 1970).

In order to explore participation, delegates considered the following themes:

1. How do university quality managers / strategic planners define participation?

Participants’ definitions of participation typically identified a two-way learning exchange or relationship between the University and a range of entities, such as ‘the external geographical community’, ‘the internal community’ (i.e., management strategies embodying participatory engagement with staff across the university), ‘the professions’, ‘government’, ‘students’, ‘the Maori community’ (from a New Zealand delegate).
2. What purpose does it serve to include forms of participation?
Delegates discussed many drivers for participation, including:

- **Legislative mandates**, such as those embedded in University Acts or Government Acts and Treaties;
- **Strategic objectives**, such as those related to engaging within a particular geographic catchment area, or particular professional groups, for the purpose of ensuring sustainability of the University's core processes of teaching and research;
- **Historical drivers**, such as those evident through a long history of engaging with the community as being intrinsic to the 'idea' of the 'ethical' university (however there was some discussion about the more recent resistance to this as an intrinsic quality or characteristics of the 'idea' of University); and
- **Opportunistic drivers**, such as those partnerships that occur through chance, opportunity and serendipity.

3. Where does my work 'sit' on Arnstein's ladder?
For this values clarification exercise, participants moved about the room to align themselves 'physically' on Arnstein's ladder, on a continuum ranging from Number 1 (manipulation) and Number 8 (full citizen control). Participants explained why they had placed themselves on that part of the continuum, and were then encouraged to reflect on this additional question:

- Is this position on the continuum of participation in everybody's best interests? If not, what initiatives could I/my university embrace to elevate the forms of participation practised to promote more substantive citizen and community empowerment?

Most participants tended to place themselves somewhere between 4 and 6 on the continuum. Therefore, their participatory engagement models tended to range between forms of consultation and expressions of partnership. However, participants noted that in many cases, the style and extent of participation strategy employed suited the context and aim of the project. It follows then that it would not necessarily be appropriate to assume that forms of consultation were somehow inferior to practices in which community members themselves took full control over the process. In many circumstances, this kind of full devolution would not support the parameters or objectives of the university project, and might even be outside the university charter. Furthermore, if community members were not adequately skilled or confident to engage in this kind of participation, then devolving full control to them could result in a potential failure of the process and a form of 'blaming the victim' (Rappaport, 1987). In acknowledgement of this, Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder' has recently been presented as a 'wheel' to highlight the fact that certain types of participation suit particular contexts, and that full citizen control is not the desired outcome for all situations (Gauci, 2001; Davidson, in Ling & Griffiths, 2000).

Another interesting vignette occurred in which one participant felt that her community engagement strategy with Indigenous people could be located at rung number 7 on Arnstein's (1969) ladder. When asked how she felt that Indigenous community representatives might rate the participation, she identified that they might rate it as a 6. Whilst not a major difference, this example shows that program managers' perspectives on the depth or strength of community participation could differ from those communities with which they are trying to engage. Therefore, some kinds of exploratory, open-ended validation process might be needed as part of ongoing dialogue with communities, in order to gauge community members’ perspectives of, and satisfaction with, the engagement process.

3. Concluding Remarks

This workshop raised several valuable issues for university quality managers:

1. ‘Participation’ is not a blanket term: it means different things to different people based on their social position and the political context. Administrators and project managers need to be clear
about the kinds of participation they intend to employ, and most importantly, why. Being clear and transparent about one’s ideological position on participation, and the logistical challenges impacting on project timelines, will result in approaches that do not promote false expectations amongst community members, or public perceptions of inauthenticity and failure if participatory strategies appear more as consultation than deep community partnership.

2. Participatory practices need to be developed that match the overall objectives of the project, and also fit in with the levels of empowerment of the communities targeted for engagement. Some projects simply may not warrant full devolution to community control.

3. Engagement practices that aim to promote participation in its deeper senses need to ensure that community members have adequate skills, resources, time and support to do so. Communities need to be provided with opportunities for leadership development and skills in participatory planning and evaluation (Butterworth & Fisher, 2000; 2001). Failure to ensure this will result in tokenism.

4. Empowerment is a long-term process made up of many actions across multiple levels of the social system (Kieffer, 1984). These actions always involve a range of ‘small wins’ – and also small losses for all players, but particularly for those with the least power (Weick, 1984). A university that embarks on a process of community engagement that includes principles of democratic participation, reflective practice and commitment to community empowerment will inevitably be faced with issues of ceding power and control to the communities with whom they have sought to engage (including students and staff). Universities can prepare for this sharing of power by building a democratic partnership with communities based on a “consensual basis for common action” (Rich, Edelstein, Hallman & Wandersman, 1995, p. 671) – one that provides a clear basis and benchmark for monitoring and evaluation.

In evaluating this workshop, delegates identified that they had found it useful for clarifying what participation could mean, as well as hitherto what it had meant to them. Participants found it helpful to consider the meaning, value and logistics of participation for any particular context. They also found it useful to consider perspectives shared from a diverse range of disciplines, such as community psychology, urban planning and health promotion. Participatory practices in university–community engagement clearly have much to draw on from the faculties and disciplines taught and researched within the university walls.

References


Hancock, T., & Duhl, L. *Promoting health in the urban context*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 1988 (WHO Healthy Cities papers, No. 1).


