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Connecting scholarship to places: human capital, learning, enterprising and an ethical approach to communities

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Abstract:

Universities have a responsibility to foster human capital, learning, and enterprising outcomes that impact positively on society and the environment within the regional communities in which they are located. In the past these were seen as essential aspects of how universities both contributed to and shaped the public good. This contribution and the ability of universities to be vehicles for critiquing and shaping the public good is currently constrained, however, by a neo-liberal paradigm that preferences rationalism, self-interest and competitiveness, and excludes processes of mutual dialogue and enterprising action by human capital that generates outcomes of meaningful worth for the community. To examine these issues, we discuss the importance of a relational ethic to underpin university engagement; an ethic that is based on Zygmunt Bauman’s (1995) forms of togetherness. We propose that an ideal form of togetherness ought to underpin engagement processes and practices to move beyond the dilemmas of conditional funding. At the conclusion a proposed empirical exploration of these ethically-based engagement processes and objectives is outlined.

Introduction

Writing in the Australian Financial Review in 2006, the Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, Steven Schwartz, bemoaned the loss of moral purpose in the modern university saying the nature of public funding for universities caused them to scramble for private sources to remain competitive. This view, along with arguments that support a Higher Education Institution (HEI) ‘third stream’ funding agenda, triple-helix type Research and Development (R&D), and other ‘partnership’ arrangements of convenience suggests a conditional or consequential relationship between HEI funding, and the basis for an ethical approach by universities with their communities and approaches to their own viability.

This conditional and competitive view about universities and their ethical responsibilities is not the relational view of the public role of the university that Boyer (1996), Dewey (1956; 1961) and others had envisaged. In their views, education was about generating social benefits, developing ethical citizenry and ensuring communities had a moral character. Our argument is that a funding-
conditional approach to ethics by universities does not see the creation of human capital, research and innovation - the core business of the university – as powerful tools that can simultaneously generate ethical processes and community outcomes of substance, as well as enhance viability outcomes for the institution itself.

To examine the dilemma that conditional funding arrangements present for universities, we discuss the importance of a relational ethic to underpin university engagement. This is an ethic that is based on Zygmunt Bauman’s (1995) forms of togetherness which he calls *being-with*, *being-aside* and *being-for*. It is the latter, *being-for*, that represents the ideal form of togetherness which ought to underpin the connection between universities, their scholarship, and place.

To move beyond the problem that funding presents for universities and how they engage with their student bodies and communities, we advocate for Bauman’s *being-for* relation to take a centre place. This ideal is critically dependent on recognising the interrelationship between learning pedagogy, resulting human capital that has the skills to generate enterprising outcomes of meaningful value, and the importance of ethical values and principles which can incorporate different spatial dimensions of communities. To provide empirical support to these claims, this paper concludes with a brief outline of a proposed exploration of these ethically-based engagement processes and objectives in a number of diverse community settings.

**Literature and themes**

According to Boyer (1996: 15), “...the university has an obligation to broaden the scope of scholarship”, by integrating discovery horizontally across disciplines and vertically by mutually engaging in wider dialogue with consequent practical application in the community. For Boyer, such engagement calls for the university to have clarity in its purpose and mission and a responsiveness that focuses on “…the issues of our day”, outside of the structural need to have additional funded specific-purpose programs in place (1996: 17-20).

According to Benson and Harkavy (2002: 4), universities can best do that by “...optimally aligning all their components and resources to radically improve the democratic quality of life in their community”. This extends on Dewey’s ideas that as education sites, universities too must transform according to changes in social life (in Bellah et al., 1992). Encouraging citizen education meant for Dewey that participation, ‘[was] to make the work of the chaotic [city] metropolis intelligible to its least favoured and most disadvantaged citizens’ (Addams cited in Bellah et. al., 1992: 152). This participation, according to Dewey and Addams, was essential to ‘a good society’ (Bellah et al., 1992). Thus, universities too were essential to developing a good society.
In this respect, one of the goals of education, indeed public education, is for it to be transformative and deliberative, to make life intelligible in this somewhat chaotic global age. In view of this, one of the primary principles that ought to underpin university and community engagement, then, is that community participation ought to be oriented toward the creation of a good society, or in other words, a public good. Such learning ought not to be exclusive and out of reach to those at the margins of society, which the decrease in government funding of universities increases the possibility of.

Unfortunately, the relationship between universities and conditional funding sources has increased and is reflected in their transformation. It is, however, a transformation that sadly does not seem to be responding to changes in social life, but rather it is one responding to changes in economic life. Steven Schwartz’s claim that ‘universities are not public goods that require government subsidies...[and that] higher education can be financed privately’ (2006: 3) are worrying considerations. Those at the margins, those in the middle, find it harder and harder to engage with public education.

The more that a competitive, business logic underpins university funding the more that university engagement with its student and community populace begins to take on the appearance of a utilitarian agenda which disregards spatial uniqueness. Majoritarian considerations reign and in this climate universities become tied to accountability measures and project development that reflects the needs of funding bodies over the communities of which they are a part. The connectivity of scholarship to the places within which it takes part is being lost and we ask, “do universities know what the common, public or shared goods of their regions are”? Perhaps these are being imposed in top-down approaches whereby those in positions of power express and define these matters for them?

In this neo-liberal environment where the values of competition, efficiency and productivity dominate, universities fail the Boyer test. Forms of togetherness are fragmented in terms of the connection between scholarship, place and ethical outcomes. The question raised by Schwartz (2006: 3) about benefits universities offer to society and his idea that they can foster human liberty and freedom introduces a problematic convergence of values and principles. It sees a liberal philosophy that has been co-opted by neo-liberal economics used to guide the Australian public education system. In this context we might ask if Australians see these values and principles of liberty and freedom as being central to the public good, if this is so then we might further ask “where did our public good go”?

**Where did our public good go?**

“Knowledge is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquefied. It is actively moving in all the currents of society itself.”
University and regional community engagement is premised on certain values and principles that are said to foster dialogue, innovation, mutual participation and learning critical to the success of engagement. But more than this, Boyer (1996), and Benson and Harkavy’s (2002) views embody an assumption that universities facilitate scholarship and learning whereby educators relate with people who are genuine seekers of knowledge. Indeed, although it seems an ironic position for him to present, Schwartz (2006: 4) too suggests that ‘students learn by being a part of an ethical community’. Universities are not simply ‘drive-through mobility factories,’ they shape the currents within which knowledge moves in society in Dewey’s sense of the term.

In these respects, universities reflect places where social practices ensue that can foster ethical communities (Isaacs 1998; Sunderland & Graham 1998). Communities are not value-free places where social institutions such as universities can locate themselves and assume students are part of ethical communities. Ethical communities must be fostered, worked at, critically engaged with and they are certainly not places of conditionality. Palmer’s (2001; 2006a; 2006b) previous use of the term ethical communities has highlighted the importance of shared values and principles developed through conversations, deliberation and participation by community members. Her work also illustrates the problematic of value convergence on maintaining a commitment to a public or common good.

Contrary to Schwartz’s vision of ethical communities, Terry Cooper (1997:11) articulates that ethical communities are ‘multi-logical (in that they can incorporate more than just an economic logic), dialogical (conversation and relational formed), heterogenous, they do not have an all encompassing tradition, they are reflective, analytic, involved and open’. This is contrasted for Cooper (1997: 10) with moral communities where ‘norms are imposed, codes for behaviour are given based on pre-existing traditions, law and order is imposed to deal with chaos, homogeneity is favoured, they are authoritative, devolved, closed and bounded’. For us, Schwartz’s vision is a moral community one where the opportunity for universities to contribute to the public good is closed off.

Universities were once considered places where the contribution to a common and public good was integral to scholarship, and so the idea of a social practice pursued over time with a goal and purpose in mind is fitting to understanding Boyer’s (1996) scholarship of engagement, and Benson & Harkavy’s (2002) goals of university-community engagement. Indeed, Schwartz (2006: 4) too, in spite of claiming support for private funding of universities, supports the notion that education ought to have purpose and that the purpose is to develop ethical behaviour. To provide a ‘basic sense of ethics,’ as Schwartz (2006: 4) contends, requires more than simply involvement and participation that generates economics. Universities need to be places that encourage enterprising learning
that fosters a broad-based human capital with not only a conscience for ‘being’, but a purpose for ‘doing’.

According to Garlick et al., (2007: 33), ‘the process of enterprising is one of working together in groups with complementary and reinforcing skills and knowledge with the objective of achieving a better result in the community with the attributes at hand’. Being enterprising in this sense is not about a profit-driven logic guiding practices, but rather a sense of moral and ethical purpose that is related to the needs of the spatial localities within which universities are situated.

All four ideas (Boyer 1996, Issacs 1998, Benson and Harkavy 2002 and Garlick et al 2007) hold that higher education institutions are central to a particular vision of a public good, but it is a vision that Sunderland & Graham (2006) assert has been eroded by economic rationalism. Because economic rationalism is dependent on Bauman’s (1995) ideas about relations which are aside or with, universities that incorporate conditional funding arrangements into their agendas will not be able to articulate ‘a vision of what they are trying to achieve for society, and to live up to it’ (Schwartz 2006: 4).

**Ethics beyond profits**

Being ethical is not simply about ensuring that our consequences provide a good outcome, the processes by which outcomes are achieved also count and this is why we have made criticisms of conditional funding being connected to university engagement approaches. Certainly, one must advocate for any ethics that works toward benefits that develop a public good, however, a critical and ethical stance also means that universities have a role to play in evaluating and shaping how that public good comes about. Schwartz (2006) for example presents a vision of a public good shaped by human liberty and freedom, but such values appear to be more applicable to the United States more than Australia. Scholarship ought to advocate for the kinds of togetherness that can foster ethical engagements and not merely become as Schwartz (2006) rightly points out a production factory of corporate sponsored research.

Ethical communities and ethical engagement are thus premised on Bauman’s (1995) form of togetherness called, being-for. He describes the distinction between being-aside and being-with as one where being-aside others merely take on the qualities of person-like entities which are mostly seen as ‘just on the side’. Funding partners simply interested in products reflect this kind of relation. This might also be called simple ‘involvement,’ a type of togetherness that is characteristic of top-down engagement approaches where the goal of engagement is predefined, often tied to consultative purposes or funding conditional arrangements.

From this state of being-aside:
Certain entities are picked up by shifting attention and made into persons. From *being-aside* the selected others move into a modality of *being-with*...[however] *being-with* is still a kind of mis-meeting of incomplete beings, of deficient selves where no more of the self tends to be deployed in the encounter than the topic at hand demands; and no more of the other is highlighted than the topic-at-hand permits (Bauman 1995: 49-50).

In a neo-liberal context, universities engage in mis-meetings of people in their communities, certain entities are picked up and they are made into persons but nothing more is demanded of them than the topic at hand permits. Again, this is often shaped by the conditions of funding arrangements where accountability requirements demand people are involved, but it is as Bauman notes, ‘nothing more than the topic at hand permits’. Do we call this mutual engagement? This is contrasted by Bauman with *being-for*, which is

[a] leap from isolation to unity; yet not towards a fusion that mystics dream of shedding the burden of identity, but to an alloy whose precious qualities depend fully on the preservation of its ingredients alterity and identity (Bauman 1995: 51).

Although it is critical to acknowledge here that Bauman (1995) does not apply his ideas of togetherness to situations that he foresees as probable, he advocates rather that the leap and transcendence to this kind of beingness is coincidental, perhaps even serendipitous. Our proposition remains that certain social settings do in fact foster *being-for* relations and this social setting can be universities (Palmer 2006a).

Regional communities are a good milieu for universities to achieve ethical engagements that foster a sense of ethical communities or togetherness objectives because they readily enable the horizontal and vertical connections that Boyer spoke about. However, much of the spatial location of university campuses that has occurred in Australia over the past decade (Garlick, 2000), and their attempts at retrofitting principles of engagement have not achieved what they might because of an unwillingness to preference public objectives ahead of institutional, or entity-based, objectives. The tension is between institutional objectives which are oriented toward a commonly shared public good and funding-conditional objectives oriented toward private interest.

At this end of the engagement spectrum, institutions simply seek local support for their global aspirations and income generation from local student enrolments, local research and consultancy partnerships. They emphasise structural determinants such as ‘partnerships’, ‘joined-up government’, ‘bottom-up-regionalism’, and the introduction of new programs (Bishop et al., 2006). Such relationships simply emphasise ‘involvement’ based on institutional processes and governance that are top-down, ignore community knowledge, capacities and diversity, compromise intended outcomes, and emphasise ‘paid activity’ (Skara,
They do not preference an enterprising human capital approach to education that shares in Dewey’s original ideas and intentions about learning at the community level (Garlick et al., 2007).

The connection between taking an ethical and an entity-free human capital approach to community engagement that emphasises enterprising outcomes of purposeful worth rather than a structural approach, and university viability has not yet been made clear. There is still a fixation with competitiveness being the only paradigm for institutional success in engagement relationships (see OECD, 2007). This leaves the ‘big questions’ in communities – global warming, environmental sustainability, security, health and well-being, immigration, affordable housing, poverty, cultural diversity and so on to one side in HEI engagement relations simply because they are not seen as adding to institutional viability.

Conclusions: A study of community diversity

If there is one thing that current neo-liberal free-market arrangements have fostered it is choice, and in this context universities do continue to face choices about the sort of public good that they wish to contribute to. The connection of scholarship (learning, research and innovation) to places is critical in this process and by this it means that engagement must be a relational practice that concentrates on the needs and aspirations of community members and their environment. Engagement must have relevance to the regions of which the university is a part and not simply become a top-down process of ‘involvement’ implemented by institutions to create third-streams of funding.

A relational ethic that can incorporate the knowledge needs of individuals, community social needs and provide for human capital outcomes that enable real and meaningful outcomes of worth is the foundation on which regional and community engagement programs in universities ought to develop. This does not mean simply providing a statement of values and principles that are statically represented in university policy documents, but it requires ethical evaluation of whether those values and principles are shared, in a mutual way, by the communities and regions of which universities are a part. On the question posed by Schwartz about what public good universities seek to shape, we concur. We do not, however, believe that private funding will foster the kind of public good that is premised on Bauman’s ethical relation of being-for.

Universities are at a crossroads of opportunity whereby they can be critical incubators that facilitate ethical processes and outcomes and generate human capital that has a capacity to be enterprising in community engagement and regional development in these ethical ways. They cannot allow standard entities (business firms and institutions) to take precedence over their responsibility to
build ‘creative associations in special places’ (Garlick 1998). The cannot allow an economic logic to dominate that holds at the centre of itself a dualism between economic and societal issues, including the environment (Sunderland & Graham 2006).

Values and principles are central to ethical communities of which students ought to indeed be a part. These are only committed to when a being-for ethic, rather than a utilitarian agenda is employed. This means seeing localities, and people within them, as they are and not attempt to impose certain visions and norms on them that are not likely to be sustained in the future. Some places where our research is seeing the bottom-up approach to ethical communities taking place includes:

- Community activism in response to top-down government infrastructure decisions;
- Planned residential arena such as gated communities, retirement villages and master planned suburbs;
- Indigenous community;
- Innovative business networks
- Virtual communities and activism through internet usage; and
- International communities.

In this work a research team is concerned to explore the relationship between values, ethics and learning processes in various contexts, and how intended outcomes are shaped by knowledge and the role of higher education in processes of engagement. In this way it is possible to map how a being-for ethical relation can underpin a vision of universities and their commitments to contributing to a public good.

References


