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Using a situated knowledge lens to reveal knowledge gains for community partners engaged with a university – community partnership

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Abstract

This paper examines the types of knowledge gained by community partners working with social science students on the Interchange Programme: a university – community partnership that adopts features of Participatory Action Research and critical pedagogy. The paper draws on a qualitative study with sixteen community partners from the voluntary sector and interprets the findings through a situated knowledge lens. The research reveals the strong influence the policy environment has on driving community partners to look outward to such partnerships. In turn, this frame influences their understanding of knowledge gained in terms of its usefulness in supporting their organisations to adapt to the external policy environment, particularly austerity measures. Glimpses of a more critical understanding related to the injustices faced by the sixteen community partners' service users are also revealed, facilitated by the programme's participatory approach. Although the study is small-scale and perspectives of the community partners temporally located and context-driven, it has wider implications for other university-community partnerships concerned to support voluntary community organisations in their local community.

Keywords: University-Community Partnerships; Voluntary Sector; Situated Knowledge; Austerity.

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences and perspectives of community partners working with students on the 'Interchange Programme', a university – community partnership. While the primary focus of the paper is the types of knowledge gained by community partners, it also demonstrates some of the associated benefits and challenges of such university-community collaborations. This type of partnership can be captured by the idea of the scholarship of engagement: a reaching out into the community to share knowledge and facilitate opportunities for applying it through a reciprocal relationship (Boyer, 1996; 2016). In the case of the Interchange Programme, the community partners are voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), who work with undergraduate social science students on community-led participatory action research

(PAR) projects. This paper therefore explores the relatively under-researched perspective of community partners (Ganote and Longo, 2015; Stoecker and Beckman, 2009) with the aim of contributing to existing literature on university – community partnerships and highlighting potential benefits for VCOs.

Given our focus on knowledge gains, we situate this paper in relation to debates about what knowledge is: knowledge for whom, and knowledge for what? Throughout the paper, we explore knowledge as understood through the features of PAR practiced by the programme, and the associated critical pedagogy that underpins its university/academic side. For example, students are introduced to Paulo Freire's (1972) ideas, as well as aspects of Mike Neary's concept of 'Student as Produce' (2010). Critical educationalists draw attention to how these ideas incorporate the concept of transformative learning, and how this concept is overly idealised and elusive in nature (see: Ellsworth, 1989; Tinning, 2002; Elliot, 2005). With perspectives of community partners once removed from the classroom, we can expect transformative learning to be even more obscured from our vision and therefore draw on Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge to assist our understanding.

After a brief overview of the Interchange Programme, the paper will outline some of the key ideas underpinning its approach to critical pedagogical. We will then explain the methodological approach and limitations of the study. The findings and discussion will be brought together and framed using a situated knowledge lens, in order to: PB1 make sense of the perspectives of community partners on knowledge gains acquired through engagement with the Interchange Programme.

The Interchange Programme

The Interchange Programme is overseen by the charity (of the same name) situated in a UK university. It enacts its 'public benefit requirement' (Charity Commission, 2013: PB1) by bringing together undergraduate social sciences students and community partners with problems/issues requiring evidenced knowledge. The students work with the community partner on a research project proposed by the latter and produce a research report for the community partner's use, as well as for students' academic credit.

The community partners in the study were VCOs based in Liverpool and surrounding areas in the North West of England who offer welfare provision to those who are disadvantaged in some way. The community partners, and the voluntary sector more broadly, have been subject to a complex and rapidly changing policy environment ensuing out of changes to public services commissioning and austerity policies that have reduced funding available to support the sector. The impacts of these 'turbulent times' (Milbourne and Murray, 2017: 1) have been well documented elsewhere but, briefly, they include: a shift from grants to contracts; growing competition for funding; and increased monitoring and reporting requirements. Additionally, the combination of new legislation on fundraising and accounting along with restrictions on campaigning have led to the independence of VCOs becoming compromised potentially. Consequently, the voices of VCOs are constrained (Hemmings, 2017).

Interchange aims for research projects to lead to useful knowledge for the community. The Interchange programme reaches out to the community partners by means of participatory processes through the creation of 'co-intentional educational spaces' (Ganote and Longo, 2015: 1070). These begin with community briefings, followed by the matching of student and link worker so they can begin co-designing the research. To this end, the student meets regularly with the link worker for on-site supervision and because the link worker is the gatekeeper for access to research

participants. Additionally, there are meetings with the academic supervisor and an annual community symposium where academic research and past student projects are presented, and space created for networking between community partners, students and academics.

The underpinning pedagogy of the academic side of the Interchange Programme

Over recent years, the underpinning pedagogy on the academic side has built upon standard research methods training that supports evaluative and social research (Hall and Hall, 2004; Kirton, et al. 2014) to include practices associated with a PAR orientation. A PAR approach recognises the place of practice and that there are differing ways of knowing the social world (Reason 1998). Through PAR's collaborative processes, tacit knowledge is 'reconfigured' into new knowledge in order to improve the lived experience of people involved (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006, cited in Horner, 2016: 18).

When learning about PAR, students are introduced to the decolonising theorist Paulo Freire, and his concept of conscientisation, a form of critical reflection that involves a process of cyclical reflection in action (praxis) (1972; 1994). For Freire, conscientisation facilitates the student's transformative learning, enabling: 'a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of transform reality' (Freire, 1972: 27). The teacher is seen as having the 'job of showing the way to this awakening' (Freire, 2007: 37).

Students are also introduced to Mike Neary's early ideas on Student as Producer, a concept drawn from avant-garde Marxist thinking (Neary, 2010) including Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist approach, and Walter Benjamin's 'Life of Students' (Benjamin, 1915) and 'Author as Producer' (Benjamin, 1934). Rather than leading the learning, with Student as Producer, the teacher has responsibility for organising an event that will act as a catalyst for new insights (Neary and Winn, 2009). This repositions the teacher and student relationship rendering them co-constructors of knowledge, with learning seen as 'necessary and required' in the context in which it takes place rather than predetermined at the outset (Neary and Winn, 2017: 18-19). This relationship is facilitated through research activities and collaborations that enable this repositioning and promotion of learning with communities within and beyond the university (Neary and Winn, 2009).

Critical pedagogy has been criticised for over-claiming its potential to be a 'catalyst for change' for students (Tinning, 2002: 23), and for being 'unproblematized and untheorized' in terms of how change and transformative learning (new insights leading to a more just society) can be achieved or sustained (Ellsworth, 1989: 306; Elliot, 2005). Little can be found in the literature on the strategies or stages required for enabling it, over-and-above the phenomena of critical reflection with space for dialogue (Ellsworth, 1989; Elliot, 2005). Furthermore, this emphasis on dialogue has been criticised for its potential to be the reverse of enabling, by unwittingly affirming existing power relations in the classroom, due to implicit assumptions that everyone can express themselves freely and be equally understood. Ellsworth instead advocates emphasis on the 'multiplicity of knowledge', inclusive of an understanding that is historically situated, partial, and inconsistent in scope (1989: 321). This has resonance with Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge. For Haraway, this is discerned through vision because with vision it is possible to 'mediate standpoints' (1988: 586). Vision allows awareness of the variability of situated knowledge in contrast to any illusionary universal truth, *i.e.* the 'God trick' (Haraway, *ibid* 1988: 584).

To summarise, on the academic-side of the Interchange Programme students are encouraged to adopt collaborative processes that bring them together with their link worker and academic supervisor and to draw on aspects of critical pedagogy to inform these activities. These processes are reinforced by students being encouraged to use literature/research on the subject under investigation and apply critical theory. As Haraway argues, practicing such 'critical positioning' (1988: 586) is a necessary prerequisite for developing a 'critical vision' (1994: 62). The community partners are indirectly exposed to these approaches and perspectives through engagement with the student, academic supervisor and other participatory activities. The aims are to benefit the community partner, by providing them with useful knowledge in the student report, and where possible, facilitate the community partner's capacity 'to develop self-reflective knowledge and awareness' through the participatory processes (Elliot, 2005: 367).

Methodology

This paper reports on a small-scale study commissioned by the charity's Management Committee who were seeking to discover knowledge gains for community partners. The committee hoped it would extend understanding beyond annual evaluations and previous studies and to this end, appointed two researchers, one of whom taught on the academic-side programme and so was familiar with its underpinning pedagogy (Hardwick and Coffey 2011; Kirton *et al.* 2014; Carpenter, 2015).

At the outset, we were aware of the need to be cautious regarding what should be counted as knowledge, and the potential of imposing our own and the charity's values on the research design (Lang, 2011). We therefore wanted to avoid the imposition of 'a hierarchy of categories of knowledge' (Elliot, 2005: 359) that placed value on some categories above others. We were mindful that, when it comes to university – community partnerships, it is inappropriate to establish 'a priori categories' that diminish the place of practice in knowledge construction (Elliot, 2005: 366). To avoid this, we looked to Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge. Like PAR and critical pedagogy, it sees knowledge as seeking change for the better (Genant, 2009), but recognises it as partial, embodied, from 'somewhere in particular and therefore, only one constituent of a 'larger vision', which is as yet unrevealed (Haraway, 1988: 590). This concept of vision exposes the study's methodological limitations: with its exclusion of perspectives from students and the university; it not being community-led; and, not adopting innovative participatory methods (although, this is not a requirement with PAR) (Horner, 2016). Also, the study's exclusion of community partners from both its design and the analysis of the study.

Standard qualitative methods were used, beginning with a community symposium for the first semester of the academic calendar. Link workers/participants were chosen in order to provide a balance between those hosting an Interchange student for the first time (2016/17), and those who had previously had one or more projects over the past five years. The symposium was divided into two focus groups (8 in each group), (n16) participants. The themes covered what link workers identified as pertinent issues to their organisations and the local voluntary sector, and the benefits and challenges of collaborating with the Interchange Programme. The idea was to provide link workers and researchers with the space 'to see together without claiming to be another' (Haraway, 1988: 586), and facilitate, if it were possible, the link workers' 'authentic voices' (Ellsworth, 1989: 313).

The second phase of the study followed analysis of the focus group data and entailed those focus group link workers who had worked with a student in 2016/17 (n6) taking part in a qualitative telephone interview during the following summer. This was after the link workers had received the student research reports. This group was chosen because

of their participation in a focus group and their recent experience of hosting a student. The interviewees were asked to consider their experience of hosting a student and any learning leading to knowledge gained.

The predominant size of these community partners in terms of annual income was either small (£100,000 to £10,001) or micro (less than 10,000). Two outliers fell into the category of 'medium-sized (£500,000 to £100,000)' (Aiken and Harris, 2017: 334). The type of service provision offered included support to: children, young people in education, women, asylum seekers, drug users, ex-offenders, housing tenants, residents in Black Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, people with mental health problems and welfare claimants.

The qualitative research was designed to meet ethical guidelines (British Sociological Association, 2017) and to receive university ethical approval. Both of these thresholds were cleared. With the link workers' consent, the focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed, and steps taken to ensure that neither organisations nor link workers were identifiable. The transcripts were then coded and analysed using qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo), as well as undergoing a separate charting and mapping exercise, before bringing the two together for analysis by the research team (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). The following three themes emerged: motivations for collaborating with Interchange; useful knowledge gained; and constraints on knowledge production.

Findings and discussion

Motivations for collaborating with Interchange

A situated knowledge lens of 'location, position, and situating' was employed to help frame the findings and discussion (Haraway, 1988:598). This proved appropriate as it emerged that it was the fast-changing and challenging policy environment that had acted as the primary motivator for community partners looking outward to creative partnerships like Interchange. Link workers reported that they looked to the programme to support them in developing strategies to manage and adjust to these challenges. One such major challenge was the cuts in funding across the welfare sector (to both VCO and statutory provision), leading to a reduction of resources for local welfare needs. As one link worker from a children's charity stated:

"The lack of funding forces organisations to look outward and develop links and partnerships like with the Interchange Programme."

Such cuts can be traced back to the economic crisis (2008) and subsequent austerity policies which targeted welfare providers (HM Treasury, 2010). Before then, most of Liverpool's voluntary sector funding had been provided by the City Council, supplemented by revenue from donations and charitable trusts (Jones and Meegan, 2015). This was to change when central government tightened fiscal allocation to local authorities, a change that disproportionately impacted on allocations to more deprived local authorities like Liverpool and which substantially reduced the funding pool available to support local statutory and voluntary welfare organisations (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Beatty and Fothergill, 2016; Hastings *et al.*, 2015). For example, it has been estimated that the City Council has lost 63 per cent of its budget since 2010 (Centre for Cities, 2019). This is exemplified by the comment from a welfare advice centre:

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“In 2011, 100 percent of our funding came from Liverpool City Council ..., and in 2016/17 it's 0%.”

Link workers reported that not only were their organisations facing funding cuts, but that this was compounded by the fact that cuts across the sector were leading to increased expectations of their services. As a wellbeing charity reported: *‘With the cuts to the local authority, the need is getting greater and the budget smaller, so we'll be doing more for less’*. A number of link workers reported their organisations being overwhelmed by crisis referrals not picked up by statutory services and that they were being expected to fill the gap left by reduced statutory provision predominantly in relation to mental ill health. Link workers talked of how financial hardships were increasing mental distress and a sense of desperation. As the link worker from the women's charity reported: *‘People feel desperate.’* When discussing the reduction on NHS counselling provision, the link worker went on to state:

“We find that GPs often refer [women] to us because we've got a free counselling service. It's unbelievable.”

This reflects the extent to which cuts to provision have made it difficult for people to access the mental health services they need (Layard et al., 2012), and how austerity and welfare reform have compounded mental ill-health (Cummins, 2018; Beresford, 2013).

A number of link workers from wellbeing and educational charities specifically talked about the impact of cuts to Child and Adolescents Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and how this had led to more children and young people with mental health problems failing to receive help. This situation has been recognised by the Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP) who reported the threshold for accessing CAMHS had been raised to manage the cutbacks and that services were consequently now less likely to be fit for purpose (ACP, 2018). For the educational charity the increased workload had forced them to turn to charitable trusts and foundations to acquire additional funding to meet the increased demand. For the wellbeing charities it had led to increased referrals of children who were suffering mental health crises. As one link worker from a wellbeing charity reported:

“We're getting referrals at a younger age - [children] as young as nine with mental health problems and they are no longer able to access counselling from CAMHS because of cuts. We've noticed in our area how many young people are attempting suicide and self-harming, how many... have got eating disorders. It's the lack of hope.”

Link workers were very concerned about the impact of welfare reform, with its draconian benefit changes. This was causing profound hardships for many services users. As a link worker from a housing association reported:

“The biggest thing affecting [our tenants] is cuts to benefits, cuts to their income. We have 85 households that are going to see a large cut in their income. People on a decent salary seeing that size cut in income would struggle... but when you are only just managing the bills and the rent and putting food on the table... there is no wriggle room for them to lose any more income.”

These changes to benefits had been instigated by the Welfare Reform Act 2012. This was to prompt 20 major changes to working age welfare benefits, impacting on 55,000 out of a total of 65,920 households in Liverpool (LCC, 2017). Therefore, it is no surprise that link workers from the diverse range of welfare services represented in the study

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reported welfare reform having increased levels of poverty. As a link worker from a welfare centre stated:

“We’re having to channel work into supporting people through the hardships of welfare reform with benefits reassessed, people coming off DLA and delays and sanctions in benefits.”

The combination of an increased demand for services, the needs of service users becoming more complex, and reduced funding available to support this demand, meant some community partners were reluctantly having to accept they could not provide the additional welfare support needed, leaving people unsupported in the community. This inevitably caused staff and volunteers stress and frustration. As a link worker from a welfare rights centre reported:

“My background was welfare rights, 30 years ago. Anyone who came through the door you could help those days. Now, you’re getting desperate people through the door and you can’t help them.”

Useful knowledge gained

Useful knowledge: for link workers

There was evidence of link workers building on their skills, confidence and experience through the participatory processes. One felt that being involved in the programme had reminded her of what was involved in academic research and had encouraged her to reflect on ways she could provide more detail into her own literature reviews when writing reports. Another link worker recognised that they had learned more about rigorous methodologies and ethical practice:

“It has extended our skills. They reminded us that this needs to be rigorous and stand some kind of scrutiny. So, I think it has professionalised the way we do research ourselves.” [Children’s Charity]

For another, it was more about learning basic academic skills:

“I mean I’m not academic at all. All the referencing and everything. I have learned a lot about that... if you’re putting anything in a funding report, to reference where it has come from. And there is a lot I’ve learnt that has enabled me to put things into a funding application and reports to funders... and the board of trustees.” [Ex-offender charity]

Most link workers spoke of gaining a better understanding of ‘the nature or events surrounding the research issue’ (Stringer, 2007: 189). For instance, a link worker from a drug abuse charity stated: ‘Not only does it [the process] give us data and analysis but helps us understand the situation in a new light’. Another from a children’s charity stated: ‘they bring theories to the whole process and its new and interesting’. This kind of learning surfaced through the sharing of theory/perspectives in order for a ‘reconfiguration’ of tacit knowledge into new understanding. This is a process Haraway describes as ‘materialized refiguration’ leading to ‘critical vision’ (1994: 62), and, Elliot as ‘self-reflective knowledge’ (Elliot, 2005: 367).

Other participants spoke of the benefits gleaned from networking opportunities and developing reciprocal relationships that created a ‘network of connections’ (Haraway, 1988: 590) amongst stakeholders (students, academics and community

representatives). All the link workers had attended at least one of the community symposiums. They reported that these brought together a wide range of people and led to opportunities to discuss the challenging issues the voluntary welfare sector was facing, something not possible in their normal day-to-day work. They also opened up other opportunities for collaboration. For example, a link worker from the educational charity reported being approached by an academic with a view to developing a funded research partnership. Link workers also talked of the benefits for practice of accessing scholarly knowledge not otherwise available to the sector (Brackmann, 2015).

Useful knowledge: For community partners (at organisational level)

Many community partners had worked with Interchange on projects to provide evidence of the value and effectiveness of their work. Link workers reported using the project reports for monitoring and evaluation purposes and evidence for funding applications. One example was an evaluation of the impact of a community partner's contact services for children from separated families. This project directly led to the organisation securing a number of small grants to build on the service. Others too credited Interchange projects with contributing to their success in funding applications to the Big Lottery Fund. They were seen as particularly useful and valuable for two reasons: firstly, because the projects employed robust methodologies that lent credibility to the research; and secondly, linked to the validity of the methodological approaches and ethics, the projects were perceived as independent research by commissioners and funders. Link workers felt this helped them meet funders' expectations of independent verification of their social impact:

"It gives us this evidential base or... validation of our work. The fact that it is also independent of us is important because... we know it works, but it is good to have that external validation for it." [Housing Association]

Use of the term independent as above was employed by nearly half the link workers. This is interesting as it is partly being used with reference to the student researcher's detached perspective as someone outside of the organisation. Whether funders would think the same if they were aware of the participatory processes supporting the research, with the inevitable blurring of insider/outsider boundaries, is unknown.

Research projects were also used to generate useful knowledge within the context of austerity measures and related policies impacting on the community partners' work. For example, a charity supporting families from BME backgrounds found that the student's report revealed their service users needed more support to deal with multiple and complex needs resulting from government welfare benefits changes. Another report evidenced the barriers that service users experienced when trying to access mainstream services and gave the community partner some leverage with commissioners when arguing for more funding to address this.

Additionally, research projects were used to generate useful knowledge in assisting the organisation remain sustainable despite reduced funding. For example, a housing association that had requested a 'resident involvement' project to generate ideas about how services could be re-shaped and delivered at a lower cost. Following the recommendations contained in the student's report, they felt more confident in making staff redundancies and halving the size of the staff team.

In a context where resources were severely limited, link workers highlighted that they could not conduct their own in-house research, employ consultants to conduct evaluations or consult service users for service reviews. Therefore, they highly valued the opportunity to invite a student in to do this work:

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“I just want to say how valuable it is in the sense that in times of austerity with limited resources, Interchange can do a piece of research we’d like to do ourselves but we don’t have the time. It’s hard enough to do the stuff we need to on a day-by-day basis but to do a concise piece of work, go out and interview people, it would be nigh impossible.” [Welfare Rights Centre]

This challenging policy environment encouraged community partners to seek knowledge that would evidence the value and effectiveness of their social interventions to funders and commissioners, and/or evaluations to support development of strategies to help manage organisational adjustments needed to remain sustainable. These types of service evaluations are apparently common to other university – community partnerships, with cross-cutting projects, capable of influencing or even challenging policy, less so (Ganote and Longo, 2015; Adams, 2014). Link workers admitted they wanted more immediate evidenced-friendly knowledge and adjustment strategies because they were ‘necessary and required’ in the circumstances they worked within (Neary and Winn, 2017: 18-19). This did not preclude them having an acute awareness of the need for knowledge that had more ‘long term, transformational goals’ with potential to address structural and resource injustices faced by service user groups (Strier, 2014: 160).

Useful knowledge: For communities: benefits and limitations

During discussions in the focus groups it emerged that many link workers recognised the commonality of experience in relation to challenges and issues arising from policy change and funding reductions. Despite this, there was only one example given of a student project that addressed cross-cutting issues for the sector. This was a project hosted by a BME charity exploring a regional policy strategy affecting a wide range of voluntary and public sector organisations. The link worker concerned anticipated that the project would impact on specific communities across the region - beyond those directly supported by his own organisation.

Despite there being no other examples of projects designed to reveal such commonalities, link workers acknowledged the need for such work. A link worker from an ex-offender charity felt it would have the potential to provide a more holistic view of the needs of ex-offenders. Another link worker pointed to the significant negative outcomes for large numbers of her service users as a result of government policies towards asylum seekers and the need for research situated in the broader context that looked beyond the experiences of those within a single organisation to address wider, systemic social problems for this particular community:

“Whether it is an Interchange student or someone else that can actually just sit and say, actually this isn’t just happening sporadically, this is an injustice that a lot of people are facing, because there is a flaw in the system. And, actually, begin to do something with that.” [Asylum Charity]

Another link worker talked about the need to develop a consortium that could bring organisations together:

“Maybe if there was a consortium of charities that have started to notice something, that the local authority or government is not recognising, I can see a consortium saying we can all recognise this and now we need to evidence it.” [Wellbeing Charity]

There was also recognition that many organisations were duplicating research. This was perceived as being difficult to address because voluntary and community organisations were often in competition with each other for funding. One link worker explained their reluctance to even share the findings of their current student project:

“We recognise this is a really radical piece of work and we want to share it to enable learning, but we also recognise that this could give us some kind of competitive advantage.” [Educational Charity]

It has been suggested that the predisposition to service evaluations rather than common issues across the sector in university- community partnerships, is due to the design features inherent in partnership arrangements, something that may partly be the case with the Interchange Programme (Ganote and Longo, 2015; Swords and Kiely, 2010). After all, some link workers did suggest arrangements that might facilitate more cross-cutting collective projects, but this was while also acknowledging the prioritising of more immediate research needs, as well as the constraints imposed by the competitive funding environment that positioned them in competition for resources with other voluntary and community organisations.

Constraints on knowledge production

Link workers identified several challenges arising with the Interchange Programme that they saw as jeopardising the full potential of the research projects. Central amongst these was the ethical review process that all student research had to go through. For the link workers, this was experienced as highly frustrating, although accepted by some as encouraging a professional approach. One of the key ethical issues reported was the blurred boundaries between the student research and link worker. For instance, the fact that link workers acted as gatekeepers, identified potential research participants and were usually in close proximity during the data collection process, raised ethical concerns regarding potential bias and coercion. These issues had to be intricately disentangled by both the link worker and student before approval was given, causing timescales to shift and also stress and frustration.

This reflects the predisposition of most university ethical review boards, to expect a distance between the researchers and researched, and that they have a tendency to adopt an ‘othering’ of research participants (Eikeland, 2006: 37). Link workers were further vexed by the review board’s insistence on the distancing of student researchers from research participants perceived as vulnerable in research ethics terms. This placed constraints on the methods used. For example, undergraduate students were not usually allowed to undertake research directly with service user participants deemed ‘vulnerable’ persons in research ethics terms, thereby diminishing their contribution. This vision was seen as essential to ensuring the research’s relevance and credibility and of having implications for research practice more broadly, implications that can only deepen while austerity renders more and more such participants vulnerable, and their standpoint problematised.

Link workers also reported that they needed to navigate other university processes and timescales. These were sometimes quite different from their organisations’ usual approach. An example being frustration with the university assessment process causing delays with the release of the final report:

“The only issue is the timescales - which I fully understand - but for a lot of organisations, waiting that time for the report, it’s too long, unfortunately. Internal research is 4-8 weeks although it’s not as comprehensive.” [Drug Misuse Charity]

Some link workers had worked with multiple Interchange students in successive years. Some of these had sometimes experienced what they perceived as poor projects in terms of usefulness to link workers the organisation or service users. It was notable that direct reference to the student learning on the part of the link workers was absent, although there was undoubted appreciation of students and their work. On one level this could be taken to indicate that for some community partners, the Interchange Programme was about supporting them in becoming market players in what was, in effect, a neoliberal welfare policy regime (Brackmann, 2015). But, on further interrogation, it would seem to more reflect link workers' preoccupation with evidenced knowledge capable of supporting them in their quest for their service to remain sustainable or improve, in order to support service-users who they recognised as struggling with welfare needs compounded by the fallout of austerity policies. These preoccupations demonstrate how inextricably enmeshed with the prosaic was the critical. We witness this by the fusing of pragmatism with critical awareness of socio economic and political forces that compounded welfare needs, and their determination to (where possible within the constraints of the service and their role) to 'transform [that] reality' for service users (Freire, 1972: 27). Such critical awareness has to be the precursor of transformative structural change. Examples of this can be seen from some of the previous quotes i.e. the link worker from the asylum charity who spoke of the injustices faced by service users due to a flawed system, and another who called for a charities consortium to highlight injustices faced by service users.

With the stakes being so high it is not surprising that link workers expressed frustration on occasions when students had not successfully produced the knowledge sought. Some link workers commented that they had been matched with students who needed 'hand-holding' through the process and where the 'reciprocal' relationship had therefore felt one-sided. Other link workers however, showed awareness that the collaboration was about their contribution too, with 'successful' collaborations seen as contingent on the student and link worker positioning themselves as co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge, supporting each other through the participatory processes (Neary and Winn, 2010). As a link worker from a BME charity observed: *'It depends on the knowledge, experience, skills the student brings and what we as an organisation bring to that'*.

Link workers admitted that in some cases they had not fully understood the constraints on the student. For example, one had wanted the student to spend a full week at the organisation to observe their work, something they later learned was incompatible with the student's other commitments to their full-time degree programme. Others reflected that their expectations of the student may have been unrealistically high.

Finally, a lack of resources was identified as another potential constraint to community partners realising the full benefits of the collaboration with the Interchange Programme. Although the financial cost to the community partner was limited to student travel expenses, they still needed to contribute the time of a link worker to work alongside the student.

Ironically, it is also a lack of resources that placed constraints on this study design with its failure to fully adopt a PAR orientation despite PAR being a key aspect of the Interchange Programme's partnership arrangements. From the findings, the missing perspectives of students' stand out, especially given the high expectations placed on them by link workers, and the crucial importance of learning the nature of their experience of the co-construction of knowledge and understanding. Also, it would have contributed to the 'larger vision' to have learned how Interchange Programme contributed to the university's civic obligations and public benefit (Haraway, 1988: 590).

Conclusion

Although the perspectives of the community partners were temporally located and context-driven, the study can still be seen to have wider implications for other university-community partnerships concerned to support VCOs in their local community. Such partnerships may find, as with this study, that, in the current troubled policy environment, their local VCOs are motivated to look outward to such partnerships. Additionally, they may also find that this environment is likely to frame the kind of knowledge sought. In the study, this knowledge was situated and contributed to practice and so not easily reducible to 'a hierarchy of categories of knowledge' (to repeat Elliot's (2005) phrase). To this extent knowledge was useful for supporting community partners in managing and adjusting to the policy environment and concerned with 'individual and private interest[s]' needed for surviving the competitive welfare regime (Brackmann, 2015: 133). But, hidden in the prosaic, was also concern for learning/knowledge that would lead to new insights into the structural social injustices faced by service users. Submerged within the instrumental were glimpses of a more critical understanding made visible through the participatory processes that facilitated awareness of connections between internal problems and public issues (Mills, 1959). In these 'co-intentional educational spaces' (Ganote and Longo, 2015: 1070), link workers learned together with social science students, academics and community representatives, enabling 'the 'critical' to become 'an intrinsic aspect of ... practical inquiry' (Elliot, 2005: 365).

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