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Of transformation and toilets: Reflections from an informal listening project on UK higher education community engagement

Randy Stoecker

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Contents

Contents	1
Introduction	2
About My Process	3
Reflections	4
The Current State of Affairs.....	4
Academics and Higher Education Community Engagement	4
Engagement Coordinators and Higher Education Community Engagement	7
Students and Higher Education Community Engagement	7
Community Leaders and Higher Education Community Engagement	8
Final Reflections.....	10
About the Author.....	10

Introduction

In an interview of a UK neighbourhood organisation leader I learned of an interesting project documenting and mapping toilets that could be used by community residents. The project grew from the expressed needs of elders in the community who felt insecure venturing out into the neighbourhood without knowing if they could find a toilet when they needed one.

This is one of those perfect projects—it grew out of an expressed need in the community, required the community to organise itself and negotiate with power holders (in this case local shop owners with toilets they were willing to make available to the public), involved data and research, engaged two university students in producing the foldable community map, and had a clear community change goal. But the story gets even better. Because two days after this meeting I was interviewing the leader of another neighbourhood who told me about how they were going to map the neighbourhood toilets. Thinking I had stumbled upon a nascent elder-organised social movement to reveal the nation's toilets, I told my interviewee about the other neighbourhood's toilet map. And they in fact had gotten the idea from that neighbourhood. How many other neighbourhoods out there might want their own toilet map?

Are the UK's higher education institutions prepared to support local communities' desires for things like toilet maps? Of the few organised higher education outreach programs I learned about in my travels was a well-regarded program that engaged university students in providing a narrowly focused range of technical assistance to community organisations. It is a program quite similar to one that I co-organised. And except for the different accent, the community organisation leaders who told me about it could have been the exact same people I worked with. They very much appreciated the service. But they also have higher priority needs that universities have not offered to serve. There are still places in the UK, like in the US, where transformation is needed in how higher education institutions interface with their local communities. In at least one community in the UK, it appears that toilets are leading the way.

About My Process

This essay is a reflection on a listening project I conducted over a five-day period with representatives of four universities and seven community organisations in Northern Ireland¹ and southwest England in September 2010.

The purposes of the listening project were threefold: First, I wanted to explore similarities and differences between my experience with higher education community engagement practices, such as community-based research and service learning, in the US and what I could glean from limited travels in the UK. Second, I wanted to see whether I could find any UK higher education community engagement practices that did not exist in the US. Third, I wanted to get a sense of how students, academic staff, community engagement coordinators, and community residents and organisation staff talked about these practices. Ultimately, I wanted to gain new lessons and insights that might inform our practices in the US.

Throughout this essay I will refer to *higher education community engagement* as the range of activities undertaken by academics and students through formal institutional activities and offices that directly affect civil society organisations and local communities.

It is important to understand that this was not a formal research project and does not attempt to produce any generalisable findings. I only spoke with people from four counties and, while they provide some diversity of sites, they by no means represent more than a minority of UK regional perspectives. I also did not interview any kind of systematic sample of individuals, but only people whom my contacts were able to schedule for meetings in a very narrow availability window. I also did not use a strict interview protocol, preferring instead to ask people to talk about their personal experiences with, thoughts about, and evaluations of higher education community engagement. This is most accurately described as a journalistic listening project, then, rather than a formal research project. Consequently, I cannot make any characterizations of higher education community engagement as a whole in the UK.

All told, I interviewed four community engagement coordination staff from three universities, five students from two universities, eight academics from four universities, and ten people representing community groups in Northern Ireland and southwest England. I will not identify the individuals I interviewed. Hence, my observations will lack specificity and detail. These reflections were also submitted for review to everyone I spoke with before being given to representatives from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement and the World Universities Network.²

¹ I understand some of the long history of dispute over this region, and I am sensitive to its naming. Referred to as the North of Ireland or North-East Ireland among other terms by those who reject British rule over the region, and as Ulster or The Province by those who support British rule, my use of Northern Ireland connotes nothing. My main concern is in being sensitive to the similarities and differences between the higher education institutions of the region and other regions of the UK, since their formal governance is tied to the British state, and the distinctness and independence of communities in every region.

² I wish to sincerely thank David Owen at the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement and others for all the work they put into arranging interviews, as well as those who took time out of their busy day to meet with me. I extend my thanks also to the World Universities Network for funding that supported this listening project.

Reflections

The Current State of Affairs

So what are some of the similarities and differences I encountered? I was intrigued that, like in the US, the most prestigious research-intensive institutions I visited in the UK also seem to be the most challenged in providing community engagement that meets expressed and organised community needs. In the UK, these institutions are part of the Russell group—two of which I learned about in my travels. The other more professionally- and vocationally-oriented institutions I learned about seemed to have less difficulty in fitting curriculum and pedagogy to community issues. That does not mean that those two prestigious research institutions are not doing community engagement, but they seem more likely to do so based on the academic's existing research agendas rather than on the expressed needs of the communities. They also appear less likely to serve the community's least resourced communities and their organisations, with one exception.

Britain's long history of Student Community Action—an organisation dedicated to student volunteering that has been around since the 1960s—seems quite comfortable in at least one Russell Group institution.

But while the origins of SCA, as I understand, had strong political undertones, the SCA group I was able to talk with was explicitly and consciously non-political, avoiding controversy and distinguishing themselves from activist groups on campus. With a focus on providing services to populations in need, the SCA group compares to the much smaller service organisations present on many US campuses that are also much more likely to be faith-based.

Service-learning as a term does not exist as an explicit label for course-based community service among those I spoke with in the UK. What I mostly heard about were experiential learning opportunities where students were expected to volunteer in only minor nonessential aspects of a non-profit organisation's work, on the one hand, and more internship- or studio-oriented experiences in professional programs, on the other. In addition, the programs I learned about are less formal than in the US, with an absence of written agreements between institution and community. Similarly, the term community-based research (or any of its derivative terms) was not used extensively in the UK, even when it was clear in projects like toilet mapping that CBR was being employed as a primary strategy.

Academics and Higher Education Community Engagement

The same things that make higher education community engagement difficult in the US seem to apply in the UK. First and foremost is getting academics to support such activities. Two academics described this work as "going beyond the call of the contract," though they did not see it as going beyond the call of duty.

One reason these academics distinguished between the call of duty and the call of the contract is that they, like their counterparts in the US, saw their community engagement

work as primarily serving students' educational needs. One academic staff member even explicitly discouraged community groups from expecting quality outcomes from the students' community engagement activities, and one department-based community placement module deleted an objective focused on community outcomes because they believed they could not deliver on it. In all cases, academic staff members talked extensively of how community engagement work was designed to enhance student learning, but they lacked conceptual or theoretical perspectives on community outcomes and did not address the question of community change with anywhere near the depth that they discussed student outcomes, even when I pressed them on it. Like in the US, those academics I spoke with from professional programs were more focused on quality community outcomes than were those from liberal arts departments. But academics from professional programs, while they could better articulate what community outcomes they were trying to achieve, did so in a very concrete rather than conceptual/theoretical manner. Their focus was on accomplishing projects, not considering how those projects may or may not build capacity in the community or its organisations.

Regardless of the focus, it is still extra work for academic staff. The academic in most cases needs to find and develop placements for students, and manage the issues that arise in such placements. In modules which involve multiple groups of students paired with multiple organisations, those management tasks can require a great deal of time.

Added to this challenge is a further set of barriers that I heard about from the Russell Group institutions. In these institutions, there is a powerful set of constraints impinging on what is considered worthy scholarship, with research defined by disciplinary questions taking precedence over practical questions and international research taking precedence over local research. And that seems to be the case even with a new national policy encouraging researchers to consider the practical consequences of their research. This is no different from the US, where the most prestigious research institutions find it the most difficult to engage academics in local community-led research. The difference may be that, in the US, there are many small private colleges that have historically been out in front in terms of local community engagement. Consequently, both in the UK and the US, what suffices for community engagement in the promotional materials of large research universities are *translational* projects where academic staff present colloquially-framed versions of their research to community audiences who have not been involved as collaborators in the design of the project.

Engagement Coordinators and Higher Education Community Engagement

Higher education institutions' engagement coordinators are tasked with working through many challenges. And it is difficult work. Higher level administrative changes make it difficult for these coordinators to know where they stand among the existing institutional priorities. They are also on the front lines of trying to manage the often contradictory expectations of community groups, academics, and students. Community groups, as we will learn below, have specific needs they would like met, and would very much appreciate coordinators coming to them to collect their project ideas and find student and academic matches for them. Academics are reluctant to make commitments to

community objectives, but still want placements for their students. Students want to collect experiences and may or may not have skills to offer in return.

Intriguingly, the Russell Group institutions have community engagement offices but struggle to develop community engagement, while the other institutions seem to have more visible community engagement (at least from the perspective of the community members I spoke with) but struggle to develop the administrative support for them. In those institutions the academic staff, as I have noted, work well above the call of the contract to make these things happen, but some of those I spoke with feel like they are at or past their limit. There are also cases where some of the community engagement coordination is decentralised to office staff within a department, which can take some of the burden off of academic staff.

There are a variety of ways by which community engagement offices attempt to identify viable community projects. One institution's community engagement office explicitly uses a science shop model. In another institution the coordinator is more likely to interface with larger wealthier organisations or city agencies, rather than small community organisations, which is also typical in the US. One department-based coordinator is responsible for not only finding student placements but, in a unique twist, is also responsible for managing university-sponsored programs in the community, maintaining partnerships with other community stakeholders, and managing intra-community tensions those projects interact with.

The engagement coordinators I spoke with, whether they are dealing with course-based, community-based, or student volunteer-based community engagement, all seem to have a gut-level sense of the tensions and contradictions surrounding higher education community engagement. Most importantly, and in contrast to my experiences in the US, they worry about students losing intrinsic motivation if their community engagement is tied too closely to academic credit. They have concerns about how to develop the skills of students and academics to engage appropriately with communities. And they worry about securing adequate resources in an atmosphere of state fiscal cutbacks.

Students and Higher Education Community Engagement

Students provide the muscle to much higher education community engagement. Ultimately, much of it can't be done without them. But how to prepare them before a project, how to mentor them during a project, and how to evaluate them after a project remains uncertain in the US and, it seems, in the UK. The professional programs I learned about seemed to be the best at answering these questions. Because professional programs everywhere such as nursing, planning, public health, library and information science, public administration and others are already oriented toward producing professionals who are educated and trained, they have all developed various preparatory skill-based curricula to support that goal. And these students with relevant and developed professional skills were the most highly regarded by the community organisation leaders I spoke with. But the training is not perfect. Like in the US, I heard stories of students who sometimes did not behave professionally, or resented being placed with an organisation with whose politics they disagreed, or did not follow through to the extent the organisation desired. I did not hear these stories with the same frequency as I have in the US. But I also heard only a few organisations describe experiences with students from non-professional programs.

For the students' part, those doing projects in the community get satisfaction not only from the learning, but from the sense of accomplishment. In one case I co-interviewed a community organisation leader who recruited their student collaborator to meet with me. That student was also considering volunteering with the organisation on a new project because the previous experience was so rewarding.

And in contrast to US students' desire to become involved in service learning, there is some scepticism, among at least the few UK students I interviewed, regarding the value of the service learning model. SCA students that I met with expressed concern about making volunteering a graded experience. For these students, volunteering is not an intellectual experiential learning scheme, but simply a way to help others. And while they did not explicitly articulate their discomfort with the US model of service learning, I got the sense that they believe student volunteers should be internally motivated and that the practice could easily be corrupted if it is promoted to the status of a degree requirement. In the US there is evidence that they may be correct as community organisation staff express concerns about students showing up to volunteer only because it is a course requirement and, consequently, providing less than quality work.

Most surprising to me was the students' descriptions of the distrust they encountered from many community organisations about whether the students would or could actually provide the services they were offering. The source of community organisation scepticism is unclear—whether it is due to bad experiences with students in the past or no experiences with students is unknown—but suggests how unfamiliar with student community engagement many groups may be.

Community Leaders and Higher Education Community Engagement

Though appearing last here, community leaders are certainly not least and may even be most important stakeholders in higher education community engagement. For the implied, if not explicit, goal of all higher education community engagement in the US is to impact the community. But for the most part the goal is implied. Academics I spoke with in the UK by and large echoed this. Those I spoke with don't have the resources to study community outcomes. The situation is similar for the community engagement coordinators. They probably could evaluate community outcomes, given the time and resources, but it's simply not practical to consider.

So managing community outcomes, and consequently steering the relationships with students and academics to achieve outcomes, becomes the default responsibility of community organisations. Without strong lines of communication between community groups and higher education institutions, explicit models of how higher education community engagement can affect the community, and standard practices for achieving such goals, the community organisations I spoke with don't often consider academics and students as possible resources when they need research or volunteer labour. In Northern Ireland, two community members described the worst case scenario. Far from academics simply being irrelevant to them, they have had too many experiences of academic researchers exploiting them—taking the community's information and building

their own academic careers by writing interpretations of the communities that seemed inaccurate and damaging.

Overall I heard very much the same kinds of statements about the community-university partnership ideal from the UK community groups as I have from US community groups. They would much prefer to have students involved with them for a few years rather than just a few months. They need support all year round, not just when classes are in session. They don't have time to be transferred around the university trying to find the assistance they need. One organisation said they can just put an ad in their newsletter and usually get the help they need that way. A university-based person described the surprise of a community organisation leader when she offered to write a grant proposal for the group. They had never even considered that a university person could write grants for community projects.

Some community organisations also do their own community research and education, and do it quite well. With appropriate support and academic staff engagement, these organisations could probably expand their research activity, making it a valuable training ground for students. Not a training ground for students to make mistakes at the expense of the organisation, but one where students could build their existing skills as research support labour. And that is where the academic staff comes in, to make sure the work that is done is high quality and on time. Community organisations in the US routinely desire academics to be more involved for just that purpose. Only one UK group I spoke with had an academic directly involved with them, and that was as much the result of the academic's past residence in the neighbourhood as of a professional commitment. Academics could also even learn a thing or two from these groups about research and education. One group in particular explicitly used popular education and popular theatre processes in their community education, and others use such models implicitly. That kind of pedagogy is a lot more fun, and potentially more useful, than the average lecture.

Many of these groups are also being managed by community members in their retirement years, providing unique opportunities. Stressed full-time community organisation staff rarely had time to supervise and mentor students. But of the community groups I learned about, three were led by retired people who had the time and interest and, in one special case specific skills, to mentor students.

Final Reflections

Like in the US, then, it appears there is a lot of work to do in advancing higher education community engagement in the UK. And if what I have learned from higher education community engagement conferences in the US and UK is any indication, those questions are not being fully addressed in either nation. Moving from self-congratulatory storytelling to deep critical thinking about community engagement is the first step that all of us, on any continent, must do.

Based on my experiences in the US, a couple of ways that UK communities and academics could deepen community engagement are the following:

1. Organisations and universities could collaborate locally to assess community issues, and use the results to develop programs in the universities to better fit community issues.
2. Organisations and universities could collaborate locally to discuss the challenges that students, academic staff, and community organisation staff confront in attempting to work together. Again, done locally, such a process could both uncover such challenges and build relationships between these three groups that might take the first steps in overcoming the challenges.

Ultimately, building and sustaining viable higher education community engagement programs requires building the same relationships and conducting the same knowledge-based planning as any other form of community building.

What is higher education community engagement really capable of? And how do we find that out? If the community's starting point is finding its toilets, can the university support those in search of a toilet map? How do we transform higher education to then truly meet those expectations rather than demanding that communities resign themselves to accepting only what is offered? For me, this is a single-knit sweater—the kind that, when you pull on a loose thread, the entire thing unravels into one big wad of yarn. The good news, however, is that we still have one big wad of yarn and, when it is all unravelled, we can remake it into anything that yarn can make. Best of all, we can weave community relationships.

About the Author

Randy Stoecker is a Professor in the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, with a joint appointment in the University of Wisconsin-Extension Center for Community and Economic Development. He conducts trainings and speaks frequently on community organizing and development, community-based participatory research/evaluation, higher education community engagement strategies, and community information technology. His publications include the books *Defending Community* (Temple University Press, 1994), *Research Methods for Community Change* (Sage Publications, 2005), the co-authored book *Community-Based Research in Higher Education* (Jossey-Bass, 2003) and the co-edited book *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning* (Temple University Press, 2009).

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