WHAT IS ENGAGED RESEARCH?

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What is Engaged Research?

As we begin the slow recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic we have needed to rethink how the university relates to society. Clearly the societal context has been critical in determining how a given country has been able to respond to the challenges posed. I would propose, therefore, that we reconsider the role of engaged research as a revitalized form of societal engagement. Medical research is, of course, vital but so also is the need to harness knowledge for societal good as a whole. We consider below what we mean by *The Engaged University* and how it might be consolidated, then we examine the particular nature of *The epistemology of Engagement,* on which basis we can move to the *Principles and Practice* of engaged research today. We then examine the increasingly important questions of *Impact and Evaluation*. Finally, we consider the *New Departures* we have seen emerge in the practice of engaged research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE ENGAGED UNIVERSITY

Since the turn of century there has been much soul-searching around what Stefan Collini posed bluntly as the question of “what are universities for?” (Collini 2012). While many adjectives were posed as descriptors of which the university was – (or ought to be) – collaborative, global, public, ecological, networked, relevant, etc. – (Barnett 2013: 51) – the dominant discourse that emerged was that of the “university of enterprise”. As against the ‘ivory tower’ image of the past, the new ‘engaged university’ would integrate itself into the market system and serve the needs of business. Students would need to become employable and research would become ‘relevant’. The corporate sector began to play a direct role in the teaching and research domains. The ‘third pillar of engagement with society meant effectively working to the logic of the private sector and the development needs of the state, often the same thing in practice.

There was however an alternative discourse around the university as institution engaged with society and its community outside of (or beyond) a commercial relationship. This alternative could trace its genealogy back to the ‘civic universities’ created in the big cities in the early 20th century to serve their needs directly. David Watson and his colleagues carried out a broad international review of civic engagement in 2010 and found that there was a near universal and explicit commitment to civic engagement and social responsibility in many countries, whether this was called ‘social responsibility’ ‘social justice’ ‘social development’, ‘service learning’ or ‘volunteer service’ (Watson et al 2011:18). However, this did not necessarily signal a new direction nor a break with the neoliberal model of the university: “many institutions aim through their civic work to improve their community relations and to strengthen public support for their institutions… [seen] more as a positive by-product than a priority goal”. (Watson et al 2011:209).

The submerged tradition of the university as civically or socially engaged began to come to the fore as the contradictions of ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) became more evident. In the outside world, the neoliberal model of capitalism – basically reliance on free market mechanisms in all areas of social life – had come crashing down in the 2008-09 financial crisis where the unregulated market was found wanting. The dominant discourse was shaken but it soon adapted to the new circumstances. The banks were saved by the state and the policy of ‘quantitative easing’, and the Northern universities muted their openly market oriented strategy to take on some semblance of social responsibility. The ‘university of enterprise’ became the ‘engaged university’ and instead of seeing students as simply paying customers there was now lip-service paid to the university as a public good.

The concept of an 'engaged university' was quite fluid in its inception. So, in Ireland in 2011 the Department of Education launched a new national strategy for higher education and recommended that a new 'third pillar' of engagement should join the traditional university tasks of research and teaching. It stated that "engagement by higher education with wider society takes many forms. It includes engagement with business and industry, with the civic life of the community, with public policy and practice, with artistic, cultural and sporting life and with other educational providers in the community and region, and it includes an increasing emphasis on international engagement" (cited Munck et al 2012: 21). The polysemic nature of the term 'engagement' is thus clear: at one and the same time local and global, or business and socially oriented. Like other 'empty signifiers' we might take 'engagement' as a term waiting to be filled by different discursive and political formations.

For myself I would pose the 'engaged university' as a project and not as a model. In that sense, I would go along with Raewyn Connell's analysis of "the good university" and the simple statement in that aspiration that "*Engaged* means being fully present for the society that supports the university" (Connell 2019: 172). Thus in terms of 'engaged research', as we show below, the research agenda of the university needs to respond to local and global social needs for knowledge. Likewise, in the 'good university' the curriculum is not shaped by the current needs of business, but rather the genuine needs of a transformative social project. It is important, I would argue, that we need some clarity on this project of transformation and the loose use of words that obscure the differences of this project and the various forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR) that have emerged in the last decade.

The Epistemology of Engagement

The knowledge project of the engaged university has its own epistemological underpinning. The epistemological break to call it can be dated (with some degree of plausibility) at the mid-1990's model of a transition to a Mode 2 knowledge production regime by Michael Gibbons and colleagues (see Nowotny et al 2001). Whereas in the earlier Mode 1 regime they discerned, knowledge was pure, disciplinary based, expert led and university based, in Mode 2 knowledge is always applied, problem centred, heterogeneous and embedded in diverse networks of which the university is but one. This transition coincides with the phase of marketization that led to 'academic capitalism', which opened up a market-driven engagement with the corporate sector but also, I would argue, a turn to non-expert-led engagement with social or community research problems. Transition periods- like the one from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge- pose options like the one between corporate engagement or community engagement. This choice is not pre-determined.

One way of capturing the epistemology of engagement is by returning to Paul Feyerabend polemical treatise *Against Method* of the 1970's (Feyerabend 1978). Against the prevailing 'rational' model of science and knowledge acquisition Feyerabend argued for a more open-ended (even relativist) epistemology and the acquisition of knowledge. In line with what he sometimes called an 'anarchist epistemology' Feyerabend argued that "the only principle that does not inhibit progress is: anything goes" (Feyerabend 1978: 23). More prosaically, we can say that firm, unchanging conceptions of method often hit a wall when they meet the 'messiness' of social reality. No research methodology, however firmly grounded in epistemology, is not violated at some time or other in practice. By foregrounding the importance of language in the discursive construction of social reality, Feyerabend also points us towards many of the practical issues that emerge in the conducting of engaged research.

More recently we have seen the influence of complexity theory that takes us to the issue of "mess in social science research". Already the complexity lens had directed us towards the non-linear nature of social processes and the critical importance of flows and networks. While rationalist science feared chaos, the new complexity embraced it. John Law took this view into research methodology (Law 2004) and showed how methods do not just describe social reality but also help create it. Rather than seek for clarity and precision in our engaged research we might accept that "messy" findings are normal. That is of course, if we accept that in the era of complex globalization the social world is fluid and elusive, always open to more than one way of understanding it. The epistemology of engagement would understand that social reality is not definitive or bounded, rather it is fluid and open-ended and thus open to transformation through human agency.

However, the epistemology of engagement is one area of knowledge where a Southern epistemology has been dominant. We can go back to the 1960's and Paulo Freire's influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1968, 1970) which had a huge influence beyond Brazil and Latin America in promoting a humanist approach to learning and knowledge creation. In foregrounding the subjective experience of community members, Freire empowered a reflexive-critical methodology that has carved out a space onside the positivist approach to social research. This epistemology was further developed by Orlando Fals Borda elsewhere in Latin America (Colombia) in a series of texts (see Fals Borda 1968, 2001) that placed 'participatory action research' on the global scene. This approach entailed an understanding that the researcher could not impose their knowledge frame on communities, required an ability by the researcher to step outside their own cultural frame, and the need to understand how knowledge is co-created and also communicated by the community.

Much of the English language literature on the epistemology of engagement viewed Ernest Boyer's 1996 *The Scholarship of Engagement* (Boyer 1996) as a foundational statement. Put simply "the scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems" (Boyer 1996:23). While pointing in the correct direction this is an empirical statement and does not result in a robust epistemology. Perhaps more importantly it lacks any knowledge of what had been happening in the majority world in relation to university-community relations. It also – like modernization theory and so many others – assumed that the way an issue emerged in the US had universal validity and should be adopted regardless of historical, political and cultural context. A truly global epistemology of engagement would thus need to be based on a much broader and multi-cultural understanding of the university and the specific contexts within which it operates (see Munck et al 2014).

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

The principles of engaged research, and community engaged research in particular, centre around values such as authenticity and participation. In this it differs from the usual focus in data collection on reliability (can the results be repeated) and (internal and external) validity (that is, are for measuring what you think you are measuring). The notion of authenticity turns our attention away from the techniques of data collection to a deeper engagement with the 'truth' of research. This might, for example, involve a much greater role for the co-creators of knowledge in the community. It will direct us towards being more inclusive, more open to diversity of experience and brings in the local or community level of knowledge into the research process. It is, in a way, part of the standpoint epistemology, for example as implemented in critical gender analysis and research.

Central to engaged community research is the objective of bringing about social change. More or less at random we can take research on the Kingsmead Housing Estate in England by Roger Green (2008). Theory is meant to go hand in hand with practice and Paulo Freire's radical pedagogy is explicitly referenced as a guide to both. As Green recounts "listening to residents talk about their daily lives it became clear to me that conscientization [Freire's term] might help them begin to understand, challenge, and pose alternatives to the oppressive and exclusionary socio-economic forces at the microlevel they experienced within their own lives and in their community" (Green 2008:81). From this starting or vantage point a whole 'bottom-up' approach to engaged research follows. The complexity and divisions of a community are uncovered and there is an explicit 'taking sides' approach that diverges from the neutrality advocated by most social research texts.

In practice, these principles are not always so straightforward in their application. These is no 'magic' to community engaged research and no royal road to some mythical 'truth'. Whereas they undoubtedly contribute to local or community-of-interest knowledge they also have a series of limitations we need to be aware of (see Goodson and Phillimore, eds, 2012). Community researchers, where they are involved in the pursuit of co-produced knowledge, are not value-neutral and reflect their own positionality and politics. The 'community' is not, of course, a common space, whatever its geographical boundaries may be; it is subject to divisions and conflicts. Self-appointed 'spokespersons' often emerge and become de-facto gatekeepers. This type of research, finally, can be extremely demanding and time-consuming and can also result in 'research fatigue' amongst participants as they do not always see benefits to participation nor proper recognition of their roles

Taking engaged research in its broader sense – not just community engaged research – we see it taken over, to some extent, by the impact agenda (see Smith et al, eds, 2020). Economic and social impact refers to the demountable contribution research can make to society and the economy in a way that highly benefit individuals, communities and countries. While the impact agenda may be welcomed by engaged researchers because it values external engagement it may also become a diversion from the best practice that was developing. There has been a predictable backlash from traditional disciplinary perspectives that perceive a dilution of traditional research practices and the ethos of academic freedom. Whether that perspective is an adequate counter to the emerging impact agenda is a moot point. What is, perhaps, clearer is that the impact agenda does represent a further marketization of research where all of its elements become quantifiable and financially measurable.

Engaged research sits at the interface of research and civic or enterprise engagement. Whether research benefits the corporate sector is quite straight-forwardly measured in terms of patents, spin outs, etc. Less directly measurable are civic engagement research and its impact. The quantitative focus of the impact agenda does not lend itself easily to an assessment of engaged research and community oriented research in particular. Nor is it immediately amenable to evaluation in terms of a linear model of research, engagement and impact relations where inputs lead to outputs, in turn leading to translational activities and outcomes that may promote social change (Johnson 2020:11). What this realization might lead us to is towards a new model that explicitly prioritises the co-creation of knowledge with communities and an evaluation of the value and impact of that research by the communities themselves.

Impact and Evaluation

We have hopefully shown how public engagement – in its many facets- can enrich the work of the university with new methods and critical thinking. But we also need to show how public engagement relates to the emerging impact agenda and how we might evaluate this impact. Since around 2000 (starting in the UK and Australia but also impacting in Ireland, see Brereton et al 2017) there has been a growing consensus that research should have an impact beyond academia and that we can establish metrics to assess this impact. There is an assumption that research impact is always positive, whereas this may not always be the case. While there has been a great deal of support for the idea that research should have impact, there have been serious concerns around how 'impact' is defined and then measured. In particular, there is now some doubt as to whether we can establish an immediate and measurable impact for all types of research.

It might thus be useful at this stage to unpack the various dimensions of impact that the impact agenda refers to. So, for example a review of the UK's impact agenda has found that the current system " is interpreted by some as being rather more oriented towards achieving policy and commercial impact than to achieving public engagement and dialogue or, indeed, broader social benefits" (Smith et al 2020: 57). That researchers should carry out research that is useful to enterprise was a well-established nostrum in the 1990's. Likewise, the agenda that research should be relevant to policy makers has been a consistent refrain. These varieties of research impact are not the only ones, however, and more recently, there has been a greater emphasis on societal impact. How that might be measured in a meaningful way is, of course, not simple given the complexity of social frame such an analysis of impact requires.

One of the problematic assumptions of the impact agenda, from a public engagement perspective is its somewhat instrumental nature. Thus, the UK's Economic and social Research Council advice to funding applicants' states that engagement should "shape your research agenda so that it is more meaningful and useful. As a result it is likely to have more of an impact" (cited in Smith et al 2020: 101). Public engagement is thus cast as a route to impact rather than a research strategy that is important on its own right. Furthermore, this approach that emphasizes the impact of research on policy makers is clearly uni-directional, our research findings need to speak to policy–makers. What is lost here is the two way process of knowledge production that is a characteristic of engaged research (as seen above).

The underlying epistemology of the current impact agenda can also be seen in its linear and instrumental approach. Because the emphasis is on outcomes rather than the process this makes it less than ideal for evaluating public engagement where impact is not always quantifiable and is also,

usually, a more long- term issue compared to the short-termism of much impact analysis. We do thus need to ask the fundamental, preliminary questions such as impact for who and what? What is the scale and reach of the impact? How do you decide what is a good impact and what is not? Above all for public engagement work it is the process of engagement itself that is most valuable: the debates and discussions, the messy co-creation of knowledge process and the relationships built during that process. Impact as conventionally defined may occur much later, at a time when the evaluation of the project or programme has long since closed down.

However, despite its weaknesses, the research impact agenda is here to stay and we may consider alternative ways, to implement it. The 'ivory tower' model of a university detached from society is now firmly in the past. But engagement is not only with business and government if 'societal impact' is to have any meaning. One change we can envisage is a shift from the impact of the individual researcher or super-star' to what we might call an impactful environment, that is conducive to sustained and collective efforts to harness knowledge for social transformation. We may also need to consider valuing the impact of a wider range of activities including the way the university acts as an 'anchor institution' grounding itself in place through all the myriad of employment, cultural and knowledge based impacts it may have.

We might consider research impact as two distinct varieties: instrumental and transformative (see Johnson 2020). The first is unilineal and short-termist, results focused. Public engagement activities, and engaged research in particular, are conducted largely in and around public universities. Therefore, the common good can reasonably be seen as the indicator of positive social impact. After the heyday of the 'university of enterprise', the commercialization of research and the monetization or commodification of engagement we have seen, especially post the COVID 19 pandemic, a return to a more socially responsible university. Our approach to engagement is not simply instrumental, and at its best, it has a transformative ethics and practice. The impact agenda has perhaps unwittingly opened the door again to a socially responsible university where engagement activities are transformative of students, staff and communities and the relationship between them.

If we move back to the more practical terrain of evaluating public engagement we may find different approaches to the whole issue of impact and its measurement. Civic engagement - with a social transformation ethics – does need to measure its impact of it is to be effective. But, as the Centre for Innovation in Evaluation (www.evaluationinnovation.org) has shown, we need "to push evaluation practice on new directions and into new arenas". While we do need to strive to quantify impact we cannot neglect the qualitative domain where other criteria with prevail. For example, the

quality of the relationships built up during civic engagement can be evaluated by ‘social network analysis’ tools (see Scott 2017). Conventional evaluation approaches are not always useful for example, when dealing with system change projects.

Evaluating public or community engagement cannot be done in the say way as a simple impact evaluation of a piece of research. Society in complex adaptive system and thus change processes are uneven and unpredictable. Above all, we need to foreground the two-way process of engaged research in terms of knowledge generation. It is not simply a matter of an academic intervention on the one hand and a community impact on the other. The community as a whole and particular community groups are key stakeholders for the evaluation of any community engagement programme. The evaluation process is thus itself participatory and the community is a subject and not just an object of analysis. Empowerment oriented evaluation is another variant where the tools and skills to evaluate a programme are transferred from an external evaluator to the community and its representative organisations. This may well seek to measure “impact” but the criteria for success or failure are determined at the community level.

Another key difference between engaged research and the mainstream ‘impact agenda’ is the emphasis on the local aspect, whereas the latter maintains an explicit hierarchy of impact with local at the bottom, the national level and finally, the international level of impact. If universities are to be ‘anchor institutions’, grounding themselves in their local communities with their needs and aspiration then the local domain will clearly be central. This domain is also fluid and ever changing, with different actors constantly adapting to these changes. To be successful, civic engagement requires effective design strategies, which help determine the potential impact of the interventions and allow for civic engagement skills to adapt to new situations and thus refine their effectiveness. And part of this process is a rigorous but participatory evaluation process built in at the design stage that will help us guard against assumptions and evaluations based on just instincts.

NEW DEPARTURES

There is no doubt that the COVID 19 pandemic has fundamentally impacted on the role of the university in society and, arguably, created an opportunity for a renewed commitment to engaged research. There is now a growing acknowledgement that 'business as usual' is not an option for higher education post-Covid (see Munck 2021). Social responsibility will need to become more than just a slogan for university mission statements. Civic engagement will be more needed than ever as social trust declines and political polarisation increases. Community engagement in particular needs to come out of the crisis both strengthened and empowered. Community-based research will also come to the fore as it becomes clearer that market mechanisms cannot run society or create good governance. If this scenario comes to pass something good will have come from the crisis, defined in medical terms after all as the point when the patient dies or recovers to a new life.

What we see in the post-COVID scenarios opening up is the possibility of re-imagining the university. Certainly the 'university of enterprise' is not an adequate response to the combined public health, economic and even cultural crisis we are emerging out of. The notion that higher education is a public good is becoming part of the new common sense. That education, and not private profit, was the driver of higher education was part of this shift. We are seeing a much broader recognition that universities need to (re) affirm their social or civic responsibility. In particular, we are seeing a growing recognition of the importance of community. The WHO (World Health Organization) has acknowledged that it is community coherence and resilience that to large extent determined the success on otherwise of anti-COVID measures. Community engagement, and by implication community engaged research, is coming out stronger from the crisis and communities will need to be involved in setting the research agenda for the post-COVID university.

In practical terms, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a renewal of engaged research practice as we struggled to continue our mission under the very difficult circumstances created by the public health crisis. The first and obvious shift was to online data collection methods, much in the same way that teaching was shifted online. The same limitation applied insofar as both within communities and between countries the level of connectivity varied hugely. Helen Kara and Su-Ming Khoo (2021) in the introduction to a collection around research in the age of COVID-19 note that the pandemic presented many challenges for researchers but also opened up some opportunities. These conventional research methods were tested in this new different context, but also they found novel approaches emerging as researchers responded creatively, and also with great speed, to the research needs of the community and the public health authorities as well.

As Kara and Khoo (2021 volume 3) emphasize, standard institutional research protocols have been stretched as the researcher - researched relationship is reconfigured. Given the catastrophic impact of the pandemic and very patchy response (not least, the glaring North-South disparity in vaccine availability) it was clear that the co-creation of knowledge made sense. Creativity came to the fore as routine practices were found wanting. The normative assumptions underpinning 'normal' research practices were called into question and creativity was given full flow: "anything goes" as Feyerabend had put it in the 1970's. Alongside the new emphasis on creativity was a better understanding of the duty of care (to both the researched and the researcher) and consequently to the broader issue of research ethics, now a very real concern and not just a matter of form-filling for a distant university committee.

It seems clear now that the impact of COVID-19 on research has been to enhance the need for robust research evidence in pursuit of rapid and reliable decision-making. The need for community engaged research has also become greater now as it became clear that the extent of community "buy-in" for public health measures was a key variable in determining their outcome. In regards to this renewed paradigm for engaged research in the global North, researchers would do well to become better acquainted with the practice of *Finding Out Fast* (see Thomas et al 1998) that has always been a feature of engaged research in the global South. In that context, decision-making has always been done under pressure of time and often with incomplete data. Nevertheless, within the tradition of Paulo Freire-inspired engaged research both researchers and policy makers have learnt to carry out robust, grounded and policy relevant research in resource challenged circumstances while maintaining a commitment to the community.

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