Desperate for Social Innovation: The case for the community-based University

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Abstract

This paper will argue for routine, reciprocal and meaningful partnerships between the University and the local community. Participation in both policymaking and the generation of knowledge has traditionally been dominated by over-represented groups, drawing on the limited expertise of professionals and practitioners. However, an increasing body of research indicates that the inclusion of individuals and communities living with disadvantage enhances the effectiveness of policymaking, delivery of services and generation of research. With a particular focus on the social sciences, this paper argues that the business of Universities - teaching, learning and research – must have a greater regard for the local community and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) if they are to play a role in bringing about radical social change. This is even more crucial in the face of wicked problems, such as entrenched poverty, the mental health crisis in young people and the climate crisis, that require a multi-disciplinary, multi-organisational and multi-actor approach to generating solutions capable of disrupting the status quo. Drawing on the principles of coproduction, critical pedagogy and social pedagogy, and rejecting the concept of 'employability', this paper will argue that Universities need to pay more regard to local knowledge and the lived experience of those communities most affected by the consequences of wicked problems. This would promote a community-

centric approach to research and pedagogy – and the nurturing of graduates that do not just 'fit into' the capitalist culture of consumerism that is killing us. Otherwise the potential for social change will be limited, the environment will continue to degenerate and social inequalities will persist.

Keywords: *Wicked problems; Critical Pedagogy; Social Pedagogy; Community; Disruption*

Introduction

The coronavirus threw the world into a public health crisis. The emerging global pandemic forced states to make rapid social, political and economic – as well as medical - decisions to keep their populations safe. Demands for public and voluntary services surged as communities struggled to cope with the emerging stresses of successive lockdowns (Rees et al, 2020 & 2022). What is more, there was a recognition that we, as a nation, were "all in it together" – all needed to play their part in keeping infections down. The COVID pandemic is an example of what Rittel and Webber (1973) term a "wicked problem". Wicked problems – global pandemics, the climate crisis, increasing poverty and food insecurity - are complex and multi-dimensional, requiring a 'new approach to the conduct of research and to the decision-making based on that research' (Brown et al., 2010, p. 4). This is because such complex problems, 'cannot be addressed effectively through traditional bureaucracies' (McGuire, 2006: 34). As Giroux (2022) states, 'in an age of medical and political plagues, neither critical education nor democracy has fared well' (p15). The inaction of wealthy governments to design the policies needed to tackle the climate crisis illustrate this point. For, as we know, despite the wealthiest being the biggest consumers, the environmental impacts of the impending climate crisis are falling most

heavily on the poorest and already vulnerable communities, especially in less developed countries (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). Indeed political and economic elites have no will to end global poverty or to 'stop capitalism's competitive drive for mindless growth that is devouring the environment and roasting the planet' (Hawkins, 2018). Therefore what is required to tackle wicked problems is almost unthinkable: the dismantling of capitalism and the reversal of neoliberal policies (Giroux, 2022), supported by 'a more ambitious research agenda within the social sciences' (Nohrstedt, 2022: 426). This agenda must include the knowledges of ordinary citizens. For, as Freire states, 'to alienate human beings from their own decision making is to change them into objects' (1972: 85) as Otherwise the knowledge used to address wicked problems will be exclusive, limited to that which is more convenient to engage with, likely to maintain the status quo and dismissive of the needs of those living on the margins. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change state, action to address the climate crisis requires the inclusion of 'traditionally marginalised groups, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, local communities and ethnic minorities', (IPCC, Sixth Assessment Report, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/resources/spm-headline-statements/)

Alford & Head problematise the term "wicked", arguing that it catastrophises issues rather than recognizing 'degrees of wickedness' (Alford & Head, 2017, p. 400). They argue that ordinary citizens may not have the ability and insight to engage coherently with complex social problems. However, COVID 19 illustrated how a wicked problem galvanised community engagement within the UK, with the use of local knowledge in the formation of informal networks of local citizens providing support for vulnerable members in their local communities (See for instance, Rees et al, 2020). Not only that but local VCFSE organisations were able to quickly recruit local citizens as volunteers where

public services were struggling to adapt their practice in the face of the lockdowns (Rees et al, 2022). This is because disadvantaged communities do have insight into social problems, demonstrated by their routine activities of care and repair that remain under-observed: 'an infrastructure of kindness' that keeps communities functioning and that, as social researchers, 'we could all do with recognizing rather more than we ordinarily do' (Hall & Smith, 2015: 6). David Brook (2020) at Civic Square notes too that local action, and kindness to neighbours, can make the difference between life and death in times of local and national crises. For the knowledge shared by local people going about their everyday lives can provide vital insight into local problems, but it is a different kind of "knowing" from that of academic and professional knowledge, and therefore is frequently undervalued. However, as discussed below, literature around the concept of coproduction reveals the benefits – and ethical drivers – for embracing local knowledge and working *alongside* local communities rather than *on* them.

Ironically this community focussed approach to research is emerging against a background of dominant neoliberal narratives which erode social responsibility and, instead, promote individual responsibility. For in neoliberal society the commitment to a 'common good' is undermined and instead citizenship is 'wedded to notions of self-absorption and consumerism' (Giroux, 2022: 58)

Therefore to generate the antidote to selfish individualism we need a 'collective understanding' of wicked problems through the facilitation of 'the personal, the local and the strategic, as well as specialised contributions to knowledge' (Brown et al., 2010: 4). This would provide the wider vision necessary to understand the problems that we face as a society and codesign more effective – and inclusive - solutions to them by, critically, prioritising those living with the worst effects of these problems. Thus whilst Universities are 'legitimate entities' for the generation of knowledge (Brown et al., 2010, p. 5) advocates of

social change must not ignore the valuable knowledge possessed by local communities – and the VCFSE groups that serve them. Academic and professional knowledge needs to be 'considered alongside non-specialized local knowledge' (Hordern, 2018, p. 588). Even in the face of disaster, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's Sendai Framework calls for action that is informed by 'engagement from all of society' (https://www.preventionweb.net/files/44983_sendaiframeworkchart.pdf).

The Importance of Local Knowledge

There is a burgeoning body of policy literature advocating that the design and delivery of welfare services will be enhanced by engaging communities through coproduction (Brandsen et al, 2018; Verschuere et al, 2018; Pestoff, 2019). There are many definitions of co-production, but for the purposes of this paper the model of 'collective coproduction' is useful: that coproduction refers to spaces where paid professionals (that might include state actors, practitioners or academics) 'work directly and simultaneously' with citizens from the local community 'to generate social benefits, although participants may also experience personal benefits' (Nabatchi et al, 2017: 773). Coproduction denotes a move away from 'professionals making decisions about what a community needs' and a move towards greater involvement of the communities themselves in deciding what they need (Booth, 2021, p. 68). Advocates of co-production value the knowledge of service using communities and local citizens, recognising that their lived experience is an important source of expertise. What is more, by empowering local communities and giving them a voice, solutions to social problems are more likely to be effective (Aschhoff & Vogel, 2018). For, co-production needs to create the space to have conversations that 'brings out the best of what everyone has to offer' (Jam & Justice, 2019).

This sentiment is being echoed in social research, with 'knowledge from the community perspective' becoming increasingly recognised as essential to the legitimacy of research findings (Sandemann & Kliewer 2012: 23. See also Williamson & de Souza, 2010; Beebeejuan et al 2015; Booth, 2019). Advocates of community-centred research argue that engaging communities at all stages of the evidence-gathering process, starting with identification and definition of "the problem", will facilitate a more realistic and inclusive understanding of the facilitators and barriers to social change. For 'unless data are turned into stories that can be understood by all, they are not effective in the process of change, either political or administrative' (Duhl & Hancock, 1988: 7). So, how do we reposition local knowledge in relation to academic knowledge?

For Kotzee (2014) this requires a wider understanding of what knowledge is. His understanding of knowledge creates a new space between a realist and a social dimension approach. He argues that 'rather than view expertise as one phenomenon, it may be fruitful to investigate different *expertises* in the light of differences between them rather than to force them all into the same mould' (2014: 174, my italics). What Kotzee is advocating is that rather than pitting one sort of knowledge against another, we need to value the 'differentiatedness of expertise' (2014: 175), recognising that expertise lies outside of the walls of the University as well as within. If the social change needed to tackle wicked problems is to be facilitated, the design of interventions needs to persuasive to all. What is needed is 'powerful knowledge' rather than being limited to the 'knowledge of the powerful' (Beck, 2013) which may appear as irrelevant and peripheral to the general population. If entrenched problems, such as disadvantage and marginalisation, are to be tackled then it is essential that those living with that disadvantage are able to speak for themselves, so that both learning and research takes 'account of diverse forms of evidence' (Brown

2010: 285) and that knowledge is not only shared with, but owned by, the community.

Indeed, an understanding of the social world will be exclusive and elitist if it marginalises the knowledge and experiences embedded in local communities. For local knowledge reflects a range of 'political ideology, vested interests, folk wisdom and historical precedent' (Richardson, 2017: 210) that may be guiding people's lives. If ignored, then what "we" know about the world is in danger of being limited, dominated by those able to 'promote and ratify selections of knowledge and types of discourse' (Beck, 2013, p. 182). If universities are to help to tackle wickedness then they need to 'reconnect … with their local and regional communities' (Butin, 2010, p. 3). Otherwise the practices of Higher Education will be in danger of limiting 'the capacity of the less privileged to develop informed and critical understanding of society's power structures and their own relation to them' (Beck, 2013, p. 182). When this happens, 'communities can be hyper-visible, where deploying stereotypical understandings of community members and their problems strips them of agency and makes them the target of (often punitive) public policy interventions' (Levac et al , 2022: 405).). This is particularly poignant in a time of political hostility towards migrants, and people seeking asylum in the UK. The political rhetoric of "stop the boats" and the punitive direction of migration policy has created a situation in the UK which is 'unsympathetic….complicated and unfair' to refugees and asylum-seekers (https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/our-work/championing-the-rights-of-refugees/). The Roma community too experience discrimination that is engrained in our culture and remains largely unchallenged. Thus, 'in many communities, antigypsyism has become normalised' such that the Roma community are socially and politically excluded and 'denied the possibilities that others have been given' (Council of Europe, 2015: 7 & 31).

Universities need to create the spaces and processes for meaningful engagement with local knowledge(s) so that community engagement does not unwittingly (re)create these power relations but, instead, enhances the agency of communities to engage with complex social problems and the policy-making process. Indeed, if initiatives to bring about social change are to be effective, then we need ideas 'from outside the system to disrupt entrenched bureaucracies' (Littky & Allio, 2023: 81). For ignoring the local knowledge of 'historically marginalised communities can result in re/harm' (Levac et al , 2022: 405), reinforcing social inequalities and further alienating those communities from decision-making processes.

The recent cases of parents challenging the decision-making of medical professionals in the UK (such as Charlie Gard and Archie Battersbee) illustrate the cost (financial, social, medical and emotional) of a lack of recognition of different "expertises" – a cultural void between professionals and lay people – when local knowledge is not routinely part of the decision-making landscape. The issues raised by these battles 'are not caused by bad law, or bad medical, parental or legal judgment' but the lack of a mutually supportive space 'to support parents and medical professionals when faced with such an ordeal' (https://research.reading.ac.uk/research-blog/why-changing-the-law-is-not-needed-to-support-parents-like-archies/). When parents and medical professionals conflict on the best interests of the child, medical professionals need to resist just relying on 'theoretical purity' (Lantos, 2018: 8) and instead recognise the different "expertises" that the parents are drawing on. In other words, resorting to an adversarial (legal) system in which there can only be one "winner" can only serve to drive a wedge between different sources of expertise. What is more, waiting for conflict to happen is not helpful. Instead, what is needed is a space for the engagement of the medical and the non-medical: a space for routine dialogue between hospitals and service users, where

Richardson's, 'vested interests, folk wisdom and historical precedent' (2017: 210) and religious belief systems are recognised as important sources of knowledge to the local community. This dialogue should become part of the institutional furniture. For many marginalised communities may mistrust "professionals" on the grounds that they are seen as making decisions about them, rather than with them[i]. What is more, marginalised communities often mistrust professionals, 'especially if previous experiences have pathologized or patronized them' (Mance et al 2020: 264). Not recognising and acknowledging local knowledge is likely to result in a growing chasm between academic and practitioner "expertise" and that of laypeople – and particularly of "outsider" communities. In the same way, universities should ensure that routine community engagement is embedded in University life. This should include learners encountering local knowledge as an important part of their learning, so that valuing that knowledge, gained through community engagement, becomes embedded in their future praxis.

The Myth of Graduate Employability

In light of wicked problems, how can we prepare our students to become innovative future practitioners who are able to connect with local knowledge?

There is a movement towards a more community-facing approach in higher education, partially being driven by policy developments within the UK HE Sector, through metrics such as the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). KEF was launched in UK in March 2021 to help universities 'explore data and explanations of the different ways they work with their external partners, from businesses to community groups, for the benefit of the economy and society' (Research England, 2022). TEF was introduced as part of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 in

the UK. Its aims were not only about 'recognising and rewarding excellent teaching' but to 'better meet the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions' (Department for Education, 2017). Whilst not specifically talking about community engagement, TEF does focus heavily on student outcomes, and notably ensuring graduates have the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the workplace and that the outputs of the university have an impact on the local economy. Indeed, according to the UK's Office for Students (OfS) Higher Education should provide graduates with the skills and knowledge they need to 'contribute to local and national prosperity, and the government's "levelling up" agenda' (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-strategy/), by delivering 'successful outcomes for all of its students, which are recognised and valued by employers'(https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/490d884f-03aa-49cf-907d-011149309983/condition_b3_baselines.pdf).

However, there is little consensus on what is meant by "employability", with many employers believing that the skills they need cannot be taught in the classroom (Frankham, 2016).Not only that but the dominant narrative of the UK government appears to be based on a 'skills-based definition' of employability which implies that students are 'rational individuals (who) invest in education' in order to gain economic benefits, with the prime measure of employability as the 'monetary benefits associated with acquired or matched skills' (Suleman, 2021: 550 & 558). This view of employability reinforces the economic (neoliberal) orthodoxy. However, in the face of unprecedented challenges to our society, we, as educators, need to move beyond employability and its preoccupation with potential earnings. Wicked problems suggest that far from reproducing current working praxis, graduates need to be able to work more innovatively, as culturally agile and reflexive practitioners that do not simply reproduce power differentials and adhere to the capitalist hegemony that is

slowly killing us. Criticism of the TEF exercise is that, in relation to employment, it is better at 'reflecting, replicating and reinforcing the existing pecking order than it is at challenging or modifying it' (Keep and Mayhew 2014: 14, in Frankham, 2016: 631). Thus Frankham (2016) talks about the 'folly' of the UK Government's approach to employability. Drawing on The Green and White Papers on the TEF (BIS 2015, 2016) Frankham challenges the push for universities to 'evolve' in response to the government's drive for increased 'productivity' in the workforce (2016, 269). The debate around whether there is a skills deficit is beyond the scope of this paper[ii]. Nonetheless the point that Cranmer (2006) makes is pertinent: in order to nurture the reflexive and inclusive future practitioners as advocated by this author, educators need to be mindful of 'the limitations of seeking to develop employability skills outside the workplace ' (p182).

Johnson goes further, highlighting the contradictions between government welfare policy and education policies such as TEF and KEF, such that 'academia has been tasked to address broader social ills associated with the consequences of neoliberal reform' (Johnson, 2022: 194). Johnson goes on to argue that such policies are reflective of Ginsberg's (2011) concept of the 'all administrative university' and Shore & Wright's (2000) notion of an 'audit culture', in which more energy goes into administration and corporate management than generating knowledge capable of bringing about social transformation. This is heightened by the marketisation of HE in which students are customers in a higher education market that is 'isolating, high-pressured and anxious, reflecting the norms of late capitalism' (Fleming, 2021: 84). Perhaps Chris Hedges is right when he says that the logic of the marketisation of higher education is to 'enforce conformity and obedience, to train young people to fill their slots in the corporate machine and leave unquestioned the status quo'

(Chris Hedges: Taking Back Our Universities From Corporate Apparatchiks - scheerpost.com).

Disruptive Social Science – Disruptive Graduates

If graduates are to become future practitioners capable of co-producing innovative solutions to wicked problems, then we need 'pedagogies of resistance' (Giroux, 2022: 181) in which educationalists create the opportunities for students, academics and local communities to come together to co-create 'a critical political consciousness' (Giroux, 2022: 181). Johnson calls this 'pedagogical flexibility' in which non-academics are critical in the development of learning outcomes (2022: 208). For, as innovative as a curriculum may be, it will be limited if it does not include the routine, real world experience of non-academic communities. In addition to the expertise they encounter formally as part of their academic studies, students need to be exposed to a range of non-academic expertises and have opportunities to reflect on how these different sources of knowledge might be reconciled in finding social solutions. As Weelahan states, 'students need to know how these complex bodies of knowledge fit together … if they are to have the capacity to transcend the present to imagine the future' (2007: 648).

Educators needs to ensure learners are exposed to different world views as part of their learning environment, making visible the routine "lived experience" that marginalised communities have with the social world. As will be discussed below, a community-based pedagogy, which draws on the principles of coproduction, critical pedagogy and social pedagogy, would ensure learners have opportunities to routinely engage with that local knowledge. This would provide opportunities for learners to reflect on what they know about the world, and how that "knowing" can be enhanced – and even challenged - by local

knowledge. Such learning would ensure that subsequent graduates would be better placed to become the disruptive practitioners necessary to the imagining of a sustainable and fairer future, through nurturing ‘relationships for human growth and development’ with local communities (Murphy and Joseph, 2019: 187).

We need graduates who do not just “fit in” to current working practices and a society “as it is”. We need Universities that are not simply ‘preparing and socialising the next generation of workers’(Gaya & Brydon-Miller, 2017, p. 34). Instead, we need a future work force capable of challenging the current orthodoxy of neoliberal capitalist market principles which underpin many wicked problems. We need graduates capable of imagination and disruption. This requires an innovative and inclusive learning environment that can precipitate and inspire a ‘new generation of professionals capable of (co)designing new futures’ (Booth &Green, 2022). What is more, these learning activities – placements, volunteering opportunities, research projects – need to be coproduced with local VCFSE organisations and/ or the communities they serve to ensure that the benefits of that learning are not one way. Additionally, by students engaging in meaningful activities that are codesigned with a VCFSE organisation, the learning experience will be more authentic and impactful.

However this transformation of knowledge acquisition requires more than intellectual engagement: it requires emotional engagement. Emotions such as discomfort and anger in the learning environment can ‘be crucial to “stretching and growing” in learning about difficult social issues’ (Walker & Palacios, 2016, p. 187. See also Boler, 1999). For example, discussing poverty in a classroom can create discomfort for some students, but that discomfort is more likely to be felt by all students in face-to-face interactions with those living with poverty. It is not about deliberately and recklessly provoking emotions but about recognising that emotions can play a pivotal role in developing the

reflexivity and inclusivity in our graduates needed for a future workplace able to challenge 'knowledge of the powerful' (Beck, 2013) and work with communities to coproduce solutions. Encouraging students to embrace their feelings of anger, sympathy, disgust or pain – and encounter similar emotions that exist within local communities - could help them 'move beyond discomfort to action and to allow ourselves to believe that it could be otherwise' (Walker & Palacios, 2016, p. 187). Emotions are essential to social change. Therefore students need learning experiences that develop 'emotional balance, empathetic connection, compassion and altruistic behaviour' towards marginalised communities (Zajonc, 2013: 83). This is not to be confused with the more scientific concept of "emotional intelligence". For Boler, the concept of emotional intelligence has emerged in post-industrial society in which 'scientific narratives are employed to shape the human resources necessary for capitalist expansion' controlling the 'most alien, unmanageable feature of human behaviour – emotions' (199: 58/9). Instead, emotions, such as pain and discomfort, need to be made visible in academic life – both within the learning and research environments – in order that an 'undiminishable source of energy' can be 'transformed into language' and precipitate action (Boler, 1999: 151). Social Science graduates need to have encountered the range of expertises within our communities to become inclusive practitioners. This may require 'learning, unlearning and re-learning in the context of complexity' (https://thecynefin.co/). For if graduates are

> to be culturally agile, able to work alongside individuals and communities with dissimilar experiences and from diverse backgrounds in their future lives (whether as practitioners, academics, citizens, or service users), we need to foster the heterogeneity of world views in the learning environment (Booth, 2021: 67).

For Beck, it is this facilitating of 'powerful knowledge', that is 'conceptual as well as based on evidence and experience', which encourages individuals to move 'beyond their everyday experience' (Beck, 2013, p. 179). This is

particularly important for students who come from socio-economic groups that are often disadvantaged – and less represented - in higher education. Encountering and valuing local knowledge, some of which may reflect their social identities, could enhance student efficacy and lead to more positive outcomes in terms of retention, progression, and attainment (Housee, 2018; Ellis-Robinson & Wayde-Coles, 2021). For, 'cultural sustainability' requires a learning environment in which students from all backgrounds 'can thrive, flourish, and maintain their cultural identities' whilst developing an 'authentic understanding' of the diverse communities and individuals they will encounter both within and outside of the University walls (Ellis-Robinson & Wayde-Coles, 2021: 3-4). Engagement with local communities needs to be an ongoing process, established through routine dialogue rather than dominated by the needs of the university, limited by finite funding streams and personnel changes, and the drive to tick employability boxes. Coproduction, community-based learning, critical pedagogy and social pedagogy are key, both in relation to learning and research activities.

A Community-Facing Model of Learning

Community-based learning – what is often termed 'service-learning' - highlights the benefits of community engagement not only in terms of the benefits to the learning process, but also in relation to the benefits to the local community. ervice-learning relates to accredited learning outside of the classroom that not only helps students relate their learning in the classroom to the "real" world but also aims to develop 'an enhanced sense of civic responsibility' (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). Service learning aims to nurture a learning environment that allows students to encounter the worldview of "others", and experience first-hand how the uneven distribution of power and resources underpins inequality within our communities. However, given rising

health and wealth inequalities and the continuing underfunding of public services in UK, the pressures on the VCFSE sector to meet the needs of its communities are huge (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Therefore, the contribution that universities could make to the community, through d community-based learning and research, is more important than ever. However, service-learning activities are not necessarily beneficial to the host communities (See, for instance, Bothwell 2017; Lasker 2016; Deeley, 2010) and may even 'unintentionally reinforce() or even strengthen() power imbalances' (Harkins et al., 2020, pp. 21–22). Students may be more concerned about their CV than contributing positively to the community (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010) whilst students from poorer backgrounds who are combining study with paid work, or mature students with caring responsibilities, may struggle to participate at all. Therefore, such learning activities need to be available to all, embedded within the curriculum, co-designed around both the needs of the student and the host VCFSE organisation, rather than framed as an "optional extra".

Working co-productively with VCFSE organisations requires ongoing dialogue which positions the needs of the organisations (and the communities they serve) as paramount, so that learning activities provide a real positive benefit to the community as well as being a transformational experience for students. For placements often cost the host organisation, in time and resources, rather than providing any real value (Deeley, 2010). Whilst many of them may do this willingly, this does not sit comfortably with an agenda of mutual benefit. As Hall & MacPherson say, such an agenda should focus on 'connecting research, teaching and service to help solve community problems….contributing to….economic, environmental and social development' (2012: 4)

A more inclusive and creative learning environment needs to draw on the tenets of social pedagogy and coproduction, echoing Yosso's (2005) advocacy for 'community cultural wealth'. Yosso's concept offers a richness, in which 'the

voices of communities of colour' and other marginalised communities, such as the Roma community, present 'the potential of education to liberate' (in Ellis-Robinson & Wayde-Coles, 2021: 4). The International Commission on the Futures of Education states that universities, rather than privileging 'productivity' in terms of the numbers of research articles an academic publishes, instead need to reinvigorate pedagogy, so that 'appreciation of cultural diversity' and 'a commitment to defend human rights' are their key focus so that education is able to build 'the capacities of individuals to work together to transform themselves and the world' (2021: 60).

Social pedagogy focuses on the importance of cultural agility and inclusive practice. Social pedagogy has "community" as its foundation, promoting a pedagogy that 'addresses the potential effects of power and inequality on people, groups and communities' (Murphy and Joseph 2019: 193). It questions power relations and 'hierarchical domains' that exist between educators and learners, the researched and researchers, and instead recognises all individuals are part of the 'same life space' (Petrie et al. 2005: 22). It argues that valuing local knowledge alongside the "knowledge of the powerful" (in this case, academic knowledge) moves learning beyond limited notions of employability and instead nurtures 'an enhanced sense of civic activism and responsibility' that will enable graduates to participate actively 'within their own communities'(Hall & MacPherson, 2012: 7) to disrupt the status quo and work towards social change, both as citizens and future professionals. Social Pedagogy positions students as playing a critical role in the local community, acting as a bridge between local VCFSE organisations and the university, through activities that are codesigned with those organisations. Not only are these activities more likely to meet the needs of the community but any learning derived from these experiences will be more authentic and transformative. What is more, this approach is more likely to help graduates connect with the

knowledges, competencies and emotions to move beyond concerns about employability and embrace a model of reflective and critical practice – graduates better able to resist current orthodoxy and begin to redress the 'socio-political marginalization' that many communities experience (Ellis-Robinson & Wayde-Coles, 2021: 3). Like critical pedagogy, it promotes 'education for empowerment', where students learn alongside communities, creating potential for the emergence of 'social movements willing to fight the emotional plagues, economic inequality, human misery, systemic racism, and collapse of the welfare state' (Giroux, 2023: 21).

Exploring an example of this in my own practice I will briefly explore the option for students in their final year of the BA social policy or sociology to opt to do applied research as an alternative to the dissertation module. As discussed in Booth (2021), the applied research module asks students to carry out a piece of research, or co-design an experiential project, which will contribute to the work of a VCFSE organisation. The student and the organisation, with the support of the project supervisor, have a dialogue about what the focus of the project should be. With the different knowledges in the room, the project is codesigned that can fulfil the needs of the organisation, but within a limited time frame, whilst reflecting the interests, skills and career aspirations of the student. Some past examples include a scoping exercise, research to support a funding bid and an evaluation of a service. One particularly innovative project was a music therapy activity designed with – and for – women with substance misuse disorder. The project fulfilled the request of the organisation who wanted to provide more positive activities for their residents. However it also reflected the interests of the student who was heavily involved in the local music scene, and perhaps more importantly, was herself in recovery from substance misuse and had been for 7 years. The project engaged service users, with their voices at the centre of the project design. That was not to say that it

did not have its challenges, but the lived experience of the student created an atmosphere of mutual support and respect, allowing the women to reconnect with a creative activity, to provide a role model of someone in recovery having progressed into higher education, and providing an amazing opportunity for the student to turn a negative experience into a valuable project that enhanced the lives of this group of stigmatised women. The project provided the resources for the organisation to continue to use in its practice, whilst the student progressed into a PhD, looking at the role of mutual aid and improving outcomes for service users with substance misuse disorder.

Community-Generated Research

Universities can seem very distant from the local community, particularly from those individuals and groups who are the most disadvantaged and less likely to access higher education. Thus, a university that fosters mutually beneficial partnerships with VCFSE organisations that support the local community could make 'the community aware, and perhaps more appreciative of The University' reducing the 'perceived isolationist attitude' (Harasta, 2022: 174). Harasta's study of American university- community relations concluded that successful and mutually beneficial partnership were based on 'an advisory board…composed of community leaders' who have regular meetings with local community groups to gather information about their needs and concerns, and feed that back to the university. This model of a community panel, embedded with the principles of coproduction and social pedagogy, could be adopted by all UK universities, where community needs could be used to prioritise research agendas, with the panel acting as a bridge between the community and the university to share expertise.

This requires an enduring commitment to local VCFSE organisations, built on a relationship of trust. Trust takes time to build. It is about constancy and 'operating under the basic assumption that all parties are working in good faith to address the chosen problem'(Mance et al, 2020: 258). It is about working co-productively, so that community needs are prioritised, local knowledge is valued and local solutions are sustainable. It is about harnessing 'community assets' and 'identifying talented leaders from the community' to generate "powerful knowledge" that benefits our students as well as the wider community (Mance et al, 2020: 258. See also Harasta, 2022).

If universities are to become more community-facing in the process of carrying out research, the knowledge generated should not only benefit the organisations and individuals who contributed to the research – but also the wider community (Booth, 2019). This requires a commitment to the local community, based on a relationship of reciprocity and mutualism that rejects 'extractivist research tendencies…where communities and individuals are subjected to research solely for the benefit of the researcher and their readers' (Levac et al 2022: 407). Universities should not just rely on VCFSE organisations as a sources of research data to enhance its scholarship and performance in the Research Excellence Framework. Instead they need to have an emotional and ethical commitment to the local community and its residents, recognising the benefits of coproducing research data and ensuring that it builds the capacity and power of the community to bring about change (Booth, 2019).

Community-based research requires a 'negotiation of knowledge from the community perspective' and a renegotiation of 'the relationship between higher education and knowledge' (Sandemann & Kliewer, 2012: 23). If community research is to have an impact than it must attend to '[how] language, discourse, and rhetoric construct our knowledge of society and its problems' (Barbehön et al, 2015: 246). In other words, Universities should not unilaterally take

ownership of research questions, and instead work with communities to identify, define and investigate problems that are a priority to them. For, 'policy problems are not immutable truths' and thus universities need to focus on how communities 'could make important contributions to how problems come to be understood and taken up (or not) in public policy' (Levac et al 2022: 410). As Kotzee (2014) identifies, expertise is not limited to professionals, policymakers, and practitioners. Instead, expertise should include the lived experience of those living with the consequences of wicked problems rather than privileging the knowledge of academics and practitioners. Identifying and researching social problems will be enhanced by the inclusion of ordinary citizens because 'the questions they ask are different from the questions asked by researchers and practitioners' (Knutagard et al, 2021: 236). This requires 'a reciprocal process of discussion and reflection' to co-produce research projects that not only endorse 'culturally competent practice' (Ellis-Robinson & Wayde-Coles, 2021: 3) but that can contribute to imagining a more fair and sustainable future. However, coproducing research is a challenge. By giving equal value to 'the know-how of professionals and laypeople' there are implications for 'sovereignty over knowledge' (Lawrence 2010: 19). That is not to say that academic knowledge is inferior to local knowledge, but that social researchers 'must be mindful of a history of violent erasure of marginalised voices by more privileged people who use their knowledge to subordinate others' (Yarbrough, 2020: 69). This is particularly evident in relation to Roma communities. What is more, in relation to wicked problems, 'engaged research…challenges disciplinary boundaries' requiring collaboration between 'different research approaches across faculties and disciplines' (Hall & MacPherson, 2012: 9). Cross-faculty working can be problematic as colleagues often work in disciplinary silos. However, as Brown (2010) states, multi-disciplinarity is essential in addressing wicked problems. Therefore community – university

partnerships should include a breadth of academic knowledge to engage in multi-organisational research alongside the community.

A Model for Routine Engagement with Community Knowledge

Generating knowledge that is powerful enough to support social innovation requires a more community-facing approach to both learning and research, supported by partnerships with the local community that are embedded in the institutional make-up of the University. For Harasta argues that there is often 'a disconnect' between what the university believes it is doing 'and what community leaders actually interpret the university doing' (Harasta, 2022: 161). For relationships between the university and the community – whether in relation to research or to providing learning experiences for students – are frequently hampered by university bureaucracy (such as policies around quality control, safeguarding and ethics). Rather than breaking down barriers by fostering a creative and 'empowering community-university research partnerships', university praxis can 'appear paternalistic' and protectionist (Hall & MacPherson, 2012: 5). In addition, community-university partnerships frequently lack 'a discernable, coherent structure', making it more difficult for communities and VCFSE organisations to 'approach universities to partner in research….resulting in universities most often being the initiators and animators of partnerships rather than the other way round' (Hall & MacPherson, 2012: 5)

Universities need to foster partnerships with VCFSE groups in a sustainable way, supporting enduring pathways of reciprocal knowledge generation rather than ad hoc arrangements. For, 'we need meaningful participation in decision-making, planning and follow-up processes for all, as well as enhanced civil engagement, co-provision and co-production' (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2016) if we are to generate solutions to wicked

problems. Students can play a vital role in this relationship building, and at the same time, enhance their ability to become reflective and inclusive future practitioners. VCFSE organisations, who are becoming increasingly critical in meeting the most basic needs of our citizens in the face of extreme capitalism, have considerable access to local knowledge. Engaging these organisations in community-university partnerships is vital. However these arrangement need to extend beyond the motivations of individual academics and "pockets" of interaction. Universities need to resist the "audit" mentality that are implied by the KEF and TEF metrics, and champion the transformational power of community-led rather than University-led research. This requires the development of university strategies and processes to facilitate routine interaction between the University and VCFSE sector, for both learning and research activities; a formal partnership arrangement.

There are more formal community-university arrangements that exist within the UK HE Sector, such as the universities of Southampton, Kent, Edinburgh. This paper has not set out to document them all. Rather this paper advocates for radical changes in pedagogy across the sector that put local knowledge and social change at the core of its agenda. Universities need to do more than fulfil the demands of the TEF and the KEF or work with VCFSE organisations to generate successful impact statements for the REF. Instead the generation of knowledge should be meaningful to – and transformational for - the wider community. Universities must be more community-focussed because it supports a powerful learning environment – both inside and outside of the university walls. What is more, there is an ethical responsibility to challenge dominant neoliberal capitalist narratives that aim to reward the few and ignore the needs of the majority – and to save our planet.

Conclusion

This paper argues that universities could extend access to its expertises and resources to support VCFSE groups in the pursuit of local solutions to local problems, engaging in partnerships with community-led organisations and local activists to co-produce a more inclusive and sustainable society. Students could play an important role as coproducers of knowledge as part of their studies.

Generating powerful knowledge through the recognition of, and respect for, local knowledge and community expertise is crucial if we are to challenge problems like the climate crisis and entrenched poverty. Habitual engagement with local communities would not only strengthen the work of the university – in relation to teaching, learning and research - but could extend learning beyond the walls of the University and open up more inclusive and imaginative dialogue about social change. This necessitates 'disrupting hierarchical power relationships in research practices' (Levac et al, 2022: 409) and adopting community-facing praxis that is not about ticking boxes. If we are to transform society, we need to include society.

Universities need to look beyond the language of employability and move towards learning activities that benefit the host organisation and the community, based on pedagogies that empower. This requires the university and the local community working co-productively, actualised through learning and research activities that prioritise the needs of VCFSE groups and the communities they serve. As Mance et al (2020: 263) state, Universities need to commit to a relationship that extends 'beyond the research period' or the need for student placements.

A 'democratisation of knowledge' (Levac et al 2022: 404) would help build capacity within the community, as well as creating a space between the university and community where knowledge and learning can flow. For this

community-facing approach to research would not just be about knowledge production but about generating knowledge powerful enough to drive 'social action and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice' (Warren et al, 2018: 446, in Levac et al, 2022: 404). For Giroux, 'at the very least….education is a form of political intervention in the world and that it can create the possibilities for individual and social transformation' (2022: 150). However this will all take time. Building the foundations for a meaningful, productive – and disruptive - partnership is a long term commitment that will take 'the length of one generation' (Hall & MacPherson, 2012: 227). But like Freire, I remain hopeful. For, 'hope is necessary, but it is not enough. Alone, it does not win. But without it, my struggle will be weak and wobbly. We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water'. (Freire 1992: 2).

Notes

[i] [i] 'Nothing about me without me' – a seminar paper advocating the importance of including the patient's voice in their medical care, was first coined by Valerie Billingham in 1998, in her paper 'Through the Patient's Eyes' at a Global Health Summit in Salzburg, Session 356.

[ii] [ii] See for instance, Moore, T., and J. Morton. 2015. "The Myth of Job Readiness? Written Communication, Employability and the 'Skills Gap' in Higher Education." Studies in Higher Education. doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1067602, or Tymon, A. 2013. "The Student Perspective on Employability." Studies in Higher Education 38 (6): 841–856.

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