

Seeking good change: discovering the transformative potential of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores ways in which aspirations for development (“good change”) are battered currently by forces and challenges that appear to be diminishing opportunities for social justice, equity and harmony. There are many examples of good change, some of which are associated with participatory development approaches and processes, and in which universities, as engaged social actors, often play a key role. The paper draws on two examples of dialogue which aim to support a reimagining of the role and function of universities: “Learning and teaching for transformation” which explores meanings and practices of education, participation and social change; and an emerging “cooperative inquiry” grounded in shared values and principles, through a programme of action research on Higher Education and Participatory Development.

GOOD CHANGE IS WORTH SEEKING

Development has been described and defined in many ways, but the notion of “good change” (Chambers, 2005) is one that is attracting increasing attention. A notion of good change that is based upon an intertwining of our economic and our moral lives, an attention to consumption which is sufficient and sustainable for ourselves, our society and our planet, and the recognition that we should live in ways that are not grounded in self-interest, but lie in harmony with the interests of all those with whom we share our existence, resonates closely with some of the key principles underlying Buddhist economics. In the month preceding this conference, we have experienced a roller-coast ride of development challenges and opportunities; epitomised not least by the terrible unravelling of the global economy following decades of neo-liberal economic policy, whilst accompanied by the election of a new President in the USA who is raising hopes, nationally and globally, of a future characterised by reason, equity and justice for all the world’s citizens. In the face of such falling and rising hopes and aspirations, those who let a vision of good change guide their actions and the way they live their lives are faced by challenges and opportunities of an unprecedented nature. Global forces are channelling voices of the world’s citizens into ever narrower spaces. The global financial meltdown is a realisation of the feeling by many that the influence of increasingly powerful economic, cultural, social and political ideologies has become the mainstream and we now are paying the price. After many years of “development” effort, we see, as Mikkelson (2005) points out, that:

World poverty remains devastating, natural resources are being depleted, political and social conflicts are escalating, and four decades of substantial aid input in the developing countries is accompanied by a net transfer of resources from the poor to the rich countries, and growing scepticism in the Third World about the objectives of international development assistance. Is there a connection between these and the fact that the interpretation of what development is all about – how it can be defined and accomplished, for whom, by whom and why – is still very

much determined by the “haves” ; by representatives of the international “aid business” – and legitimized by development researchers (p.29)

Even with the articulation of the Millennium Development Goals, there is doubt that these are achievable world-wide, not just within the proposed time frame, but achievable at all. A growing band of critics have for some time been challenging the dominant market-oriented development approaches that were preoccupied with aid and trade and came with a string of conditionalities (Schuurmann 2000). They are highly critical of mainstream development agencies and workers that only consult local communities on a pre-determined agenda to enlist their participation, often limited to receiving material inducements (e.g. food-for-work, wages, loans, grants), and providing information for research, or analyses that do need not necessarily lead to social transformation. They are also highly critical of the bad outcomes of “development” practices which seem largely to serve the needs of the powerful minority over the relatively less powerful majority. This dominance is typified by what many see as the undue influence of donors and international, globalising forces (Taylor and Angeles, 2006).

In this context, there is a growing belief that those who think and see the world differently are finding it harder to make their voices heard. There is a danger that knowledge becomes the currency of the powerful, as a means of legitimating and communicating the acceptable and relegating knowledge that is seen of less worth to the sidelines. The potential for positive social change thus becomes ever more distant on the horizon, as useful knowledge which may fuel it becomes harder to find, and the voices of those who have so much to share and contribute become even harder to hear. Knowledge itself becomes critical to the achievement of “good change”, not just in terms of availability, but also in terms of how we use knowledge to understand knowledge, or as Kitchener (1986) described it, “epistemic cognition”.

Participatory development is seen as an alternative to dominant paradigms, which serve and maintain the interests of the wealthy and the “haves” over the “have-nots”. It provides a different way forward compared with development that is led technocratically through the state or development which is expected to occur spontaneously through growth-with-trickle-down, both of these views having long been strong drivers for university contributions and resulting institutional benefits. Its advocates believe in the need for participatory approaches in action and research, and bottom-up planning decision-making processes at the grassroots level. Participatory development is a bottom-up, people-centred approach aimed at developing the full potentials of people at the grassroots level, especially the poor and marginal social groups, through their full participation in development efforts that directly affect their lives. Participatory action research (PAR), or the process of collective data collection and analysis that leads to the identification, design, implementation and evaluation of projects or programs that address local problems, plays an important role in participatory development efforts. In collaborative or participatory research processes that link theory with practice, action with reflection, project participants and community members are recognised for their capabilities and skills in producing unique and diverse knowledge of local conditions and promising project results.

Participatory development has been a growing trend over, roughly, the last 80 years (perhaps a longer period than would often be recognised, stemming as it did in colonial efforts to promote “community development” through forced “participation” by citizens. Participatory development thus started as a counterpoint to mainstream top-down planning and implementation enforced by national and international development agencies. Largely deriving from experiences in the “South”, of grassroots activists and practitioners, it has exerted an ever greater influence on the language and rhetoric of “Northern” aid agencies and organisations engaged in international development. Earlier Southern experiments in participatory development in the 1970s brought some key lessons that would be re-echoed in the 1980s by proponents of participatory development from the North. It is rare since the 1980s to find a development strategy or approach which does not refer to participation or suggest that it

is participatory in nature. The dissemination of knowledge on participatory development from North-based academics, NGOs and research agencies became more routine and protuberant since the 1990s with the mainstreaming of participation and participatory development approaches by international donor agencies, particularly the World Bank. Aware of criticisms raised by participatory development advocates that conventional development practices often result in greater social inequality, deepening poverty, and power differences, international aid agencies saw the benefits in working with NGOs advocating participatory development approaches and decentralised decision-making processes.

This “mainstreaming” of participatory development has not been without criticism however (Campbell, 2002; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cornwall and Pratt, 2003). Taylor and Fransman note:

Many development theorists and practitioners are concerned that the momentum towards “scaling-up” of participation may lead to its “dumbing-down”, where the principles and theory underpinning approaches such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) are being diluted. There is a growing fear that lip-service is being paid to participation simply out of deference to fashion or the current jargon of development aid. In order to promote and increase participation effectively, and also ethically, there is a growing need for experienced and well-trained people who are active and open to its meaning, methods and practice (2004:2)

The sometime heated debate around such issues has culminated recently in more widespread thinking about participatory development as the basis for personal learning and change, and also community development and wider societal transformation (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). In the last 2-3 years, some clear trends are beginning to emerge around the potentials for participatory development in the future, particularly with elaboration of ideas of citizenship and participatory governance, and recognition that power relations are absolutely fundamental to any concept or practice of participation (Veneklasen and Miller, 2000). Links are emerging also with debates around “deepening democracy” (Gaventa, 2005). Key themes are being identified, including the following (not exhaustive) list:

- The need to place emphasis on learning processes that are based on co-learning and dialogue, over time, combining a variety of methodologies
- A shift towards a politicisation of development, with greater attention paid to issues of representation and democratisation
- A recognition of the importance of space, as situated practices, as sites of resistance, and as dynamic political fields
- An awareness of the importance of time, recognising that participatory development processes may have given insufficient attention in the past to the lessons of historical processes of change which rarely are linear and straightforward, often with complex interactions and overlaps of political processes and events
- The realisation that emphasis of participatory development should be placed not only on the local and the individual, but also on the wider structural and institutional forces that influence, and are influenced by locally generated knowledge and individual agency.
- The need to find appropriate ways to interpret, operationalise and apply the “buzzwords”, jargon and rubbery meanings and concepts that underpin the practice of participation (Mikkelsen, 2005).

THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education institutions are playing an increasingly important role in this debate through a theoretical contribution, but also through practical engagement in a wide range of participatory community development processes. This engagement may take place through both faculty and students

becoming involved within community development processes, generating learning for all participants as a result, as well as contributing to wider social change. Over many years, educators have struggled with the challenge of providing educative programmes and experiences that make a real difference to the lives and learning of individuals, the communities in which they live, and ultimately to wider society.

To what extent are universities equipped more widely to support learning of this nature? Often universities are seen as the main institutions educating and training some of the “best and brightest” in our societies. Those who work there pride themselves on making a contribution not only to knowledge production but to the betterment of the world. By extension, this suggests that universities contribute to “development.” Universities, in fact, have been identified as a “new” critical actor in promoting sustainable development in an era of globalization (Farrant and Pyle, 2002). This raises the question, “Are universities a good place to do development work?” (Angeles and Boothroyd, 2003). But to what extent do universities really engage in “development”? And to what extent does “participatory development” enhance the nature of the contribution of universities to achieving a vision in which the world becomes a better place for all? Boothroyd and Fryer (2004) argue that there is a need for a real engagement between universities and society, and this engagement may well extend far beyond national boundaries.

So, what role will universities play, particularly in the ways that they engage with citizens – both individuals and collectives? It seems likely that universities will have an important role, because they have the real potential to bridge the global and the local, the analytical and practical, the academic and the applied (GUNI, 2008). Education at all levels plays a critical role as transmitter, reproducer or resistor of a complex weave of knowledge and power relations. In recent times, education is itself becoming transformed through changes in its purposes and priorities according to new global standards and the transfer of policies, curricula and methods of assessment between countries. Universities are, by nature, international in their outlook, and their role as producers as well as transmitters of knowledge has important repercussions in the context of globalisation, as well as in the national contexts in which they operate (Taylor and Fransman, 2004). Knowledge and the process of learning are shaped by power relations, and the institutions and forums where teaching and research takes place tend to reinforce the relationship between power and learning – a relationship that often is asymmetrical. Universities need to provide opportunities for dialogue on how to counteract the increasing power of globalisation over education, and on how to keep universities as a space for fostering critical analysis of social issues.

The institutional context in which such learning approaches takes place is subject to significant pressures (Brennan and Lebeau, 2000). Education programmes that seek to emphasise experiential learning (Taylor, 1998) through iterative processes of reflection on action, much of which may occur through collaborations between the academy and practitioner and professionals in the field, are frequently coming under threat. Participation and participatory approaches in education have emerged as a means of not only promoting inclusivity, but as a means of recognising and shifting power structures, and ultimately contributing to social change and transformation. This includes the recognition that knowledge is a means of propagating power; hence participation must involve discourse around both power and knowledge. This has economic, ideological and organisational implications (Cloete, 2002) for institutions that provide and aim to facilitate adult education and learning programmes.

Inclusive approaches are needed to address diversity and difference and highlight ways in which these are essential ingredients of civil society. Many approaches have engaged with issues of access, for example by marginalised people (on the grounds of colour, ethnicity, language, gender, wealth or well-being) as entire communities, or within communities. Great gains have been made in this regard in many countries, and broader access to education has opened doors to more diverse learners, whose different needs must be met. The encounter of diversity, complexity, change, context, knowledge and learning

raises particular challenges for educators who are seeking to prepare adults for work in social, community and development contexts, whether in the public or private or voluntary sectors. The issues are as relevant for educators in the global North as in the global South, where the assumptions behind mainstream development models and epistemologies are coming into question in equal measure. Those who work in higher learning institutions - including the author of this paper - need to re-examine how their approaches to knowledge and learning may be either contributing to solutions or reinforcing problems. Are we preparing our diverse learners – including ourselves as educators or managers – to be reflective, innovative and adaptive?

LEARNING AND TEACHING FOR TRANSFORMATION

Against the backdrop of these and other related challenges, the author has been involved in a dialogue among about 300 educators from around the world, called ‘Learning and Teaching for Transformation’ (Taylor, Pettit and Stackpool-Moore, 2006). This dialogue has moved through several iterations, with strong roots in concepts and practice of participation. The link between learning and participation emerged from an understanding that both are based upon an integration of reflection and action and other forms of knowledge, and that both can contribute to social change. The dialogue thus began with a number of questions. What are the relationships between education, participation and social change? What needs to be learned, and how, in order to embrace diversity and difference both within and outside institutions of higher learning? How can learning promote transformation of individuals and society?

Over four years, the dialogue has engaged with a wide range of people involved directly in education as collaborators in a mutual learning process, to members of organisations and institutions in partnership with education providers, to policy-makers and those who guide and support teaching and learning throughout the education system. It has proved especially relevant to those involved in the preparation of individuals for engagement in fields such as development, governance and citizenship, and within sectors that aim to bring about personal and social change. The dialogue strives for collective ownership, whilst providing a network of support to participation, collaboration and community development across and within all levels of the education system. It advocates forms of learning that are grounded in the principles and practices of participatory development and action research, and seeks to encourage these forms through the sharing and generation of both theory and practice. As one participant put it,

We are attempting to establish communities of practice which transcend the usual institutional and hierarchical boundaries (participant, LTT1 – note, each round of the LTT e-forum has acquired a number; there have been 12 rounds to date).

Although those engaging in the dialogue have come from diverse Higher Education Institutions and many countries, there has been a common interest in the role of adult learning in processes of social change, and in how to better understand, design, facilitate and institutionalise practices of transformative learning. Participants in the e-fora work within many different sectors: health, education, HIV/AIDS, agriculture and forestry, housing and other aspects of community development. Geographically, the dialogue has attracted people from throughout Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia and New Zealand. The proportion of men and women participants engaged has been approximately equal. Contributions from participants have often addressed deeply personal concerns and experiences emanating from the interaction between the individual and the context in which they are engaged as actors in the field of education.

Underlying Concepts and Theories in the Dialogue

Experiential learning and action research have both been perceived through the dialogue as effective mechanisms for challenging existing theories to test their relevance and applicability in changing contexts. Action research itself was examined as a strategy for participatory knowledge creation and exploration of the contextual validity of theories (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Bringing into question dominant positivistic pressures in higher learning institutions stressing objectivity and rigour, action research can provide a liberating and participatory methodology to move the academic from the core to the periphery and to value other forms of knowledge.

Processes of action research are indeed closely linked with concepts of participation, subjectivity and personal reflection (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001). Some participants suggested that these have the potential to promote empowerment and challenge existing power relations in the classroom, in the institution, and in the world.

Participatory and AR approaches most often are not only about collaboration between different stakeholders but more or less explicitly also about empowerment. They have to do with 'power' — with power to 'be oneself' as much as with the power to 'do things.' (participant, LTT6)

The discussion of theory extended to include epistemological notions of ways of knowing and being in the world, and larger philosophical questions about humanity, with a view that knowledge itself was an individual construction, derived from varied sources including life experiences and applied theories. In higher education theory today, there is much interest in how to facilitate 'deep learning', a process of developing and changing ones way of viewing and thinking about the world, recognising that 'education is about conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information' (Biggs 2003, Ramsden 1992). One participant questioned the nearly exclusive emphasis on deepening conceptual knowledge and sense-making, at the expense of other dimensions of knowledge and sense-making.

Theory was expressed in the dialogue, therefore, as an evolving tool that gains meaning in its application, and application in its meaning. The link between theory and practice further illustrated the interconnectedness of the two as co-dependent and equally important cornerstones of thinking about teaching and learning, participation and social change. The fluidity and evolutionary nature of this relationship forms part of an ongoing exploration of the roles and concepts of theory.

Teaching and Learning

As an educator I aspire never to make my students feel they are being made 'homeless' by being evicted from their own self-knowledge (participant, LTT7)

Through the different rounds of dialogue, the overall idea emerged that regardless of our roles and responsibilities (as teachers, facilitators, students, practitioners, researchers) we are all learners involved in a lifelong, dynamic and unpredictable process of learning. This egalitarian conceptualisation of learning also strongly resonates with issues of power and power relations.

Learning is of course a process of doing, and reflecting and relearning, in other words a dynamic process of growth and development which is what makes us human (participant, LTT7)

Two dominant concepts of learning prevailed during the discussions, and intensive debate occurred around the central ideas of 'experiential' and 'dialogic' learning.

Experiential learning: that form of learning where experience (of the world) is transformed into knowledge (about the world) as the basis for action (in the world). Experiential learning is thus a pragmatic process through which each of us continually seek to 'better fit' the world about us, where this might involve change in ourselves, change in the world about us, or change in the relationships of the one with the other (co-adaptation). (participant, LTT2)

There were also critiques of both 'praxis' and of learning cycles as being overly linear models, and as limited to the iteration of experience, conceptual analysis and action as the basis of change. Other dimensions of learning, expressed for example in emotional, spiritual, artistic and embodied forms of knowledge, are not included (Heron 1992). In applications of *praxis*, the understanding of power is often one-dimensional, based on class oppression alone.

The non-dialogical dimension of learning was strongly reflected in examples of teaching and facilitation methods. Some participants expressed confusion about how to differentiate between their role as facilitators, participants, or both, reflecting an underlying belief in the value of self-knowledge, personal experiences, and the emotional dimensions of learning.

In effect, what we are trying to do is to expand our learning to include not only what and how we understand – but also what and how 'others' understand. It is learning that transcends borders (participant, LTT4)

Integral to the success of experiential learning are relationships, and the learning environment. Participants cited particularly the existence of trust (between facilitators and learners, and among the group as a whole) as conducive for self and collective reflection. Concerns regarding the nature of curriculum itself and the inherent tensions between design and flexibility in the learning process were also explored and debated.

Is curriculum in part a dialogue about roles and responsibilities for learning? And how do beliefs and values influence the way in which the curriculum, emerges and comes to life through the learning process? The very act of 'designing' a curriculum suggests a rational, cognitive process; but in our dialogue about learning participation, the importance of emotions, beliefs and values has been stressed so often. Are teachers being pushed frequently into trying to rationalise 'learning' by creating a curriculum which is approvable and accreditable? (participant, LTT8)

Learners and Identities

Key cross-cutting themes emerging in the discussions have been notions of learners, expectations and identities, with questions raised about who learns, who teaches who, and how the full potential of innovative learning processes can be realised in the face of ingrained expectations about the roles of teachers and students within a learning environment. Participants identified a shift in perspective (for both facilitators and students) to see a diverse group of students as active contributors rather than consumers of knowledge and research. As with teachers, students arrive at classes with a wide range of preconditioned notions and expectations about their role in the learning process. Many postings in the dialogue touched on the difficulties of challenging these expectations, most notably for the students themselves. To guide students beyond their comfort zones in the learning process, dimensions of trust were identified as a necessary ingredient for participatory learning.

Teachers tend to teach in the ways they themselves were taught. And this behaviour finds further reinforcement in the prevailing techno-scientific worldview that privileges so-called 'objective'

(propositional and practical) knowledge especially over the inherently 'subjective' experiential and inspirational knowledge (participant, LTT7).

Implicit in the discussion was the central idea that everyone is a learner, throughout all the different and contradictory experiences of life. Underlying this theme is the importance of creating time and space for reflection, and the opportunity for both learners and teachers to turn that reflection into action and change.

Community and Context

Dimensions of learning and participation were explored in relation to individual contexts and identities as well as community and institutional contexts. Similarly action research was explored as a concept and approach that is very context dependent.

I get that social context (collaborative settings etc) are really effective and unique forms of learning, and that they are highly conducive to participatory methods, but I still am not sure that learning in solitude cannot also be participatory. (participant, LTT8)

Others suggested that the personal and the context cannot in fact be separated, and that there is a close link between the personal and the political, and vice versa.

The personal IS political: I express my politics through my self and my self through my politics. (participant, LTT6)

The role of language and communication was also explored as both limiting and facilitating dialogue, and participants commented frequently on the limitations of language and constructions of words for conveying meaning, and linked these ideas with notions of extended epistemologies and 'alternative' ways of knowing and being.

The question of language is crucial for facilitating expression of knowledge, accessibility of information, interaction in the learning process. (participant, LTT8)

Educational experiences, both successes and failures however they are determined, are fundamentally context specific. As participants shared insights and reflections from their own practices, they emphasised the pitfalls of simply applying the same technique in other context.

For me, one critical aspect of participatory approaches (in any situation) is that space and respect is given to the personal self whilst acknowledging the context in which he/ she is operating. So, in teaching and learning, the individual is paramount yet is enabled to work within the context of the collective (participant, LTT4)

Challenges of Institutional Acceptance

The moral of the story is that we also need to work upward to change the kinds of evaluation strategies and information that those with the power of the purse will accept. It is not enough to struggle with the dilemmas as they are handed to us. We also need to try to change the rules (participant, LTT2)

Institutional issues have proved to be a major preoccupation of many participants in the dialogue. Focusing on their own roles and positions within these institutions, participants offered reflections about

factors opposing change, such as hierarchies and power relations, an ‘obsession’ with rigorous research and research ratings, and pressures for standardization in curriculum and assessment. They shared also factors that are conducive for change, such as ‘good’ facilitation, practices of action research and experiential learning.

A special project with a participatory commitment and design [often] occurs in a larger university context, a context that is nearly always hierarchical and non participatory. (participant, LTT1)

Many of the participants reflected on their personal role in championing the change process, with implications for situating oneself in the core or the periphery of an institution. The relationship between Higher Education Institutions and the community was also examined, and indeed how participatory approaches can impact and re-define that relationship:

But do you have to leave behind, effectively, the institution from which you have come in order to work deeply in community-based research or action? ... Do you have to forego the possibility to bring about change in your own institution of higher learning when forging a different kind of relationship with those outside? (participant, LTT1)

Participants also linked their own ideas about personal change with those of the institution, suggesting that first and foremost change has to come from within. Linked with other cycles of learning and reflection, it was suggested that the change process gains momentum once one institution has effectively been changed by processes of participation, inclusion and reflection. The type of change desired was subject to challenge however.

Could it be that one of the most important and desirable shifts in university education is not to bring this wonderful informal learning into the classroom, but instead to recognize what occurs outside of the classroom and to provide a sounder environment for these student-driven initiatives to take place? (participant, LTT4)

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

What can we do, practically, together, or individually to make a difference, as a result of what we are learning here together. Through our common and personal reflections and theorising, what are the implications for our praxis? What may we do, and how should we be? (participant, LTT6)

Returning to the theme of this paper, higher education institutions appear to have the potential to make real contributions to “good change”, but are beset by a number of challenges in attempting to do so. Discussions about strategies for change, often deeply political, have in many ways epitomised the core of the LTT fora, and draw together many of the other thematic concerns. Action research was explored in this context, for example, as a strategy for institutional change. Experiential learning was proposed as a way to challenge existing power dynamics in a classroom. Suggestions were also offered about participatory approaches to curriculum design and assessment. Overwhelmingly however, participants identified that the primary impetus and commitment to change must first come from within.

I realize now more than ever, that in fact, I cannot MAKE transformation happen in anyone except myself and even that is a daily struggle... So the dilemma remains... What are the enablers for OTHERS to make their own decisions to change their daily practice and daily

thinking to work towards peace in themselves, their families, their communities, their countries and their worlds? (participant, LTT3).

The initiative has continued to raise vital questions. The process of sharing thoughts, reflections and case studies, continues to show that these issues are resonating with many different individuals, theorists, practitioners, in many diverse contexts and realities all over the world. In essence, the LTT dialogue itself aspires to create a network of learning and collaboration across institutions and geographical borders.

It fed me and reminded me of why I do this. It sustained me and reminded me of the importance of community – community that is not limited geographically (workshop participant, April 2005)

A common set of values and principles has emerged through the dialogue which perhaps summarises how participants in the LTT dialogue view the potential of educators, through the use of participatory approaches, to contribute to positive change, in individuals, communities and society. Participants share:

- an un-ease with the established concepts and practices of teaching and learning embraced by many of the institutions we are connected with;
- a conviction that there are alternatives we can share and adapt that can make a difference in the way education is positioned and carried out;
- a belief in the need to attend to the personal, reflective and relational dimensions of our practice, beyond the usual professional standards;
- an understanding that process and content cannot be separated, and that our ways of working are as vital as the content we manage;
- an appreciation of knowledge and learning as constructive processes, in which learners and their experience must play a vital and active role;
- a respect for the inherent worth and dignity of learners, as individual beings, with agency for transforming themselves and their societies.

These shared values articulated through the LTT dialogue, which would seem to resonate strongly with the central tenets underlying Buddhist economics, have deep implications for the teaching, research, and community development functions and roles of universities. A need is growing for universities, colleges and other institutions of higher learning to train educators, develop pedagogical strategies and teaching learning processes that contribute to collaborative social learning for participatory and community development goals. Universities, as sites of resistance and spaces of situated practices, need to deal with their own democratic planning and governance challenges as other social institutions and development actors confront issues of representation and democratization in the field. Finally, universities have a significant role to play not only in finding appropriate ways to both demystify and concretize the practice of participation, but also in influencing wider structural and institutional forces as they educate individuals and local communities.

The LTT initiative has aimed to enhance the capacity of institutions of higher learning to develop and deliver effective education programs that contribute to a wider transformation of individuals, institutions, communities and society. Linking a wide range of international networks and partners, through cooperative learning and research activities and approaches, the initiative advocates forms of learning that are grounded in the principles and practices of participatory development, action research, reflective practice and experiential learning. The LTT initiative has revealed that higher education institutions have an enormous potential to contribute to development and social change. While challenges do exist, participation can be a valuable tool which enables them to fulfil this role, in a range of different ways. For example, individuals within higher education institutions may explore ways of

changing their practices through professional development which emphasises personal innovations in teaching and learning. Engagement in wider networking can nourish and support such endeavours. Managers and administration staff may recognise, support and establish innovations within their own institutions which strengthen capacity. They can share lessons learned through their personal networks and community linkages. NGOs, community-based organisations and practitioners can explore possibilities for collaboration and joint learning with education institutions in developmental initiatives. Donors and policy-makers can help to create an enabling environment in which these practices can flourish, by supporting capacity building at the local, national, regional or global level.

Particular areas of interest for further exploration highlighted in the dialogue include appropriate assessment and evaluation methods including participatory impact assessment; contextualised approaches to learning; participatory curriculum development; organisational learning and change approaches that support and mainstream participatory and collaborative learning; and the development of national and regional education networks in ways that are appropriate to the socio-cultural context. Following directions such as these, higher education institutions may become able to realise their developmental potential through collaborative and participatory approaches that promote community development and wider social change.

COOPERATIVE INQUIRY, ACTION RESEARCH AND THE “CONQUIRY”

The LTT dialogue is of course one of a number of initiatives that are engaging with questions of how Universities may become key actors in the struggle for justice, equity and harmony. Another such initiative, “Higher Education and Participatory Development”, has emerged from an engagement in dialogue of socially-committed educators from different parts of the world. They have sought to explore common understandings of participatory development, and to inquire into forms of collaboration between universities and wider society which might bring about a radical rethink about the roles and functions of universities. The origin of this dialogue lies in different international contexts within which socially engaged researchers and educators have sought to inquire into, and act upon, the constraints and opportunities for bringing about change at the level of the organisation. It has extended also to the wider institutional (societal) level, seeking ways in which to support the engagement of universities in participatory development and processes of social change.

To this end, a group of engaged scholars from a number of countries including Thailand, Brazil, Uganda, Kenya, Canada, UK and the USA came together in 2006 at an international conference organised by the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Together, they identified the need to articulate a shared vision, purpose and goals for a more proactive stance by universities to contribute to addressing social injustices and inequities through a deeper societal engagement. This agreement led, through a collaborative writing exercise conducted virtually, to the framing of their values and beliefs in the form of a “manifesto” by UNESCO jointly with the Institute of Development Studies and the University of British Columbia (Taylor et al, 2007). This exercise was highly reflective, in which a series of contested issues arose. Through a deliberative process, albeit one that was conducted and facilitated virtually, a final consensus was achieved which now provides a strong foundation for action research. The group has recognised that having a vision is vital, but also that it is not enough in itself. Action is needed that is grounded in the vision, common purpose, and the principles that guide the collective work. Through continuing dialogue on these issues, including through what has become known as the “Conquiry” in a number of universities in Thailand, a series of actions are being identified that the group believes are needed at the level of their organisations in order to develop their capacity to support processes of societal change which address experiences of injustice and inequity.

The next stage of this collective effort for good change is the development of an action research process, following the principles of cooperative inquiry. This action-based methodology can, according to Ospina et al (2008), help foster connectedness and contribute to healing the university-society schism. They observe that “doing this requires more than mere replication of the methodology; it entails engaging in dialectics with practitioners, a process that is mediated both by democratic aspirations and claims of authority” (p. 131). Part of the intention of the cooperative inquiry will be to explore the idea and the practices of equity, and of justice, as central institutional and cultural preoccupations that in turn shape its curriculum, assessment, practices, pedagogies and modes of knowledge production and self-reflection. The intention of this group of engaged researchers is to undertake action research around such challenges, allowing each specific inquiry to emerge according to the organisational situation and wider social context in which the university is located, and thus to make available a rich source of learning to the larger group, and to a much wider audience.

CONCLUSIONS

At a critical moment in our planet’s history, there is much evidence of the urgent need for moral and ethical global and communitarian efforts. Consciousness of this need is being heightened further by the global financial crisis, and recognised through seismic political shifts around emerging and transforming social agendas – as witnessed most recently in the outcome of the Presidential elections in the USA. The dialogue and initiatives described in this paper are revealing that there are many within higher education institutions who see their role clearly as natural defenders of diversity and challengers of power asymmetries, as well as strong opponents of bland cultural uniformity. In many social and organisational contexts, taking on such a transformative role will be challenging, however. There is need for a more clear understanding of the extent to which universities provide and receive opportunities for dialogue on how to counteract the increasing negative power of globalisation over education. Still, one of the greatest challenges will be to promote the idea of universities as transformative spaces where critical analysis of social issues is fostered; and to help them achieve and promote inclusion of the voices of all community members in democratic and equitable policy processes – for the good of all.

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