

PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING IN HEALTH EDUCATION THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARTNERSHIPS

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Abstract

Introduction

The Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS) reviewed its curricula for 1994, allowing the Primary Health Care (PHC) approach to be the foundation of teaching and learning in health. To institutionalize a PHC approach, the teaching methodology of service-learning which is premised on the development of partnerships, proved useful in realizing the faculty's goal.

Aim

The aim of this study was to identify how to ensure that partnerships develop optimally and in a sustainable fashion to promote excellence and relevance in teaching and development of professional skills in FCHS.

Methods

A qualitative study was employed using focus groups with the partners in 2 service-learning programmes in FCHS.

Results

Key findings included that capacity building programmes for all partners promotes good training and education in health sciences; partners' roles should be clarified and it's imperative that formalized partnership agreements exist to ensure collaboration and enhance teaching.

Conclusion

Service-learning serves as an impetus to move higher education in the direction of multi-disciplinarity.

Key words

Service-learning, partnerships, health education, qualitative, focus groups, excellence in teaching.

Introduction

At present South Africa is in an era characterised by transformation. This is reflected in various policies that signify the transformation of South Africa into a democracy and holds numerous implications for the different departments in government, specifically education and health. These departments have to develop initiatives that will facilitate the transformation of South Africa and hence aid change and development. Higher Education Institutions have responded to this through reviewing the teaching methods employed and as they try to increase the relevance of education, institutions have developed opportunities for students to engage in experiential learning methods. This paper focuses on service-learning, an experiential teaching method employed at the University of Western Cape. The Commission on National and Community Service provides the following definition:

“A service-learning program provides educational experience:

a) under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organised service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with school and community;

b) that are integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provides structure time for a student to think, talk, or write

about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity;

c) that provide a student with opportunities to use newly-acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and

d) that enhance what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps foster the development of a sense of caring for others.” (CNCS, 1993, p.15).

Service-learning therefore provides a unique opportunity for students to become aware of the power of their professional knowledge and the ability to initiate, facilitate, and engage in the process of change and development. This is an empowering experience for young graduates (McHugh Engstrom & Tinto, 1997).

Given this definition, Jacoby (1999, p.22) asserts that no matter where service-learning is located within the institution, service learning programmes benefit tremendously from partnerships. These partnerships have resources available that could make distinctive and significant contributions to the development of quality service-learning programmes. Effective partnerships can be described as “knowledge-based collaborations in which all partners have things to teach each other, things to learn from each other and things

they will learn together” (Holland & Gelmon, 1998). The rationale for developing partnerships is succinctly captured by Kahn (1999, p.14) when she states that “universities on its own can be very isolated, sterile and arrogant places; communities too can be isolated lacking professional and analytical and technical skills BUT together they can be very powerful – capable of igniting and testing new ideas and generating “breakthrough thinking”.

The implications of service-learning as a teaching methodology are significant when true partnerships have been formed between academia, the services sector and the community as it can assist in ensuring that the training of future health professionals is relevant and that they will develop the community-oriented competencies and civic responsibilities to enable them to deal with the rapid and continually changing landscapes in health (Sternas, O’Hare, Lehman & Milligan, 1999 and Hayward & Weber, 2003).

Service-learning in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at UWC

In an effort to make service-learning more meaningful to student learning, the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS) reviewed its curricula for 1994, allowing the Primary Health Care approach to be the foundation of health and welfare. Two

modules were conducted for a service-learning pilot run in 2003. The general objectives of these modules were:

- “to set the students on the path to become independent, critical and caring health professionals, committed to delivering affordable, accessible, appropriate health care to all in South Africa;
- to introduce students to health and health care as a science;
- to help students position themselves as future health professions in the context of South African history and society and the communities they will serve;
- to introduce students to the concepts of caring and professional ethics;
- to develop in students an understanding and appreciation of the primary health care approach, the value of inter-disciplinarity and team work and the importance of community service; and
- to equip students with a range of academic and professional skills, which will enable them to operate successfully in an academic and professional environment” (University of the Western Cape Student Manual 1998, p.4)

The research that was conducted was aimed at identifying what is required in order to ensure that partnerships develop optimally and in a sustainable fashion in order to promote excellence and relevance in teaching and development of professional skills in the health sciences at UWC.

Methodology

In order to obtain an understanding from the perspective of the partners, a qualitative and descriptive design was ideal to provide rich information from participants' perceptions and experiences within their natural setting (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). This research was exploratory to gain a better insight around the development of partnership and to generate possibilities for future research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The rationale for this methodology was also rooted in the attempt to discover valuable, practical and appropriate information regarding the sustainability of partnerships and how this could promote excellence and relevance in service-learning teaching.

Population and sampling

The sample was a purposefully selected group of individuals that could provide information to understand the phenomenon of partnership development. 'Purposive sampling is appropriate to select unique cases that are especially informative' (Neuman, 2006, p.222). This qualitative study is ultimately concerned with information richness and not representativeness (Patton, 1990 in Julie, Daniels & Adonis, 2004). The study population was therefore limited to the partners involved in the two service-learning pilot modules in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences.

Data collection and analysis

Two focus groups were conducted with each pilot service-learning programme. This method was selected as it provided an opportunity to "observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p.292). Eight participants were present in each focus group, which included academics and service representatives from the placement site and community members involved in the programme. A standardised schedule was developed to improve reliability and probing questions were asked where clarification was required.

Two researchers were involved in the focus groups. One of the researchers facilitated the focus group while the other researcher operated the tape recorder and made extensive observations and notes. The tape recordings were transcribed verbatim and member checks were conducted with the group participants in order to verify recorded responses and ensure validity. The observations, notes and member checks were incorporated in order to triangulate the data and enhance the validity of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that the issue of validity in qualitative research is inherent in the researcher's proficient use of the procedures of authenticity and trustworthiness.

A thematic analysis was employed where dominant themes were identified. The

limitations of a focus group as a data collection method are recognised, for example the inability to generalise, self-selection biases and so forth, but the data collected are a useful indication of concerns and successes of those who are involved in the partnership and it is envisaged that these will generate possible hypotheses which could be explored in further research studies on this topic. Informed consent of participants was obtained prior to the focus group. The consent form explained purpose and nature of the study, gave assurance of anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study.

Results and Discussion

The results will be discussed under the various themes that were generated.

Knowledge of partner setting

Understanding the motivations and constraints of all the partners involved in the programme, including its staff/people, cultures, values, habits and structure, provides a foundation for effective collaboration planning (Wiewel & Lieber, 1998, p.300). This allows for the identification of the diversity of strengths and weaknesses that could influence the strength of the partnership and makes it possible to focus on the strengths and to minimise the weaknesses. Understanding the diversity of the context of each of the different partners is crucial to the sustainability of the partnership as it

prevents misunderstandings and ensures a supportive environment. In both modules it was found that there was not sufficient understanding of each partners context, which hampered the service learning partnership. One of the module teams identified that they had too many representatives from the service partner sector, which made the development of the partnership more difficult because everyone was not equally consulted or informed.

The other partnership experienced similar problems due to multiple representatives who needed to be informed. Thus, partners should be aware of the underlying power relations and politics which might hamper the development of partnerships. The following quotations highlight this:

I have to liaise with partner A, with partner B, with partner C all different partners and each have their own idea about what should happen and what you should bring. It makes it very, very difficult and I do not have the time to work with Directors and Manager plus the hands-on people. (Academic)

Maybe it was my ignorance not knowing how the centre operates and not knowing where the programme is going to fit and with whom it is going to fit and also maybe you are frustrated with me not knowing the demands I have as an academic and the problems I had with academic planning with regard to this thing. (Academic)

The participants' experience indicates that there is a need for an orientation, when new partnerships are formed. Understanding your partners' context can be facilitated by site visits. It is important for partners to develop a shared philosophy mission, vision, values and outcomes. Partnerships should be based on collaboration with an emphasis on reciprocity and equity, which could be incorporated into partnership agreements.

Communication

The development of trust is important during the partnership building, and well-planned interactions will allow partners to communicate in more meaningful ways. A community partner raised an important factor with regard to the communication in the implementation stage of the module in the ensuing quote:

Proper planning and the miscommunication – there was not really proper planning because it was just like meetings and then take instructions, what to do and so on.
(Community)

The most critical issue for the service providers was poor communication on the part of UWC academics. The services representatives raised this on a number of occasions as demonstrated in the subsequent quotations:

There was absolutely no communication with me personally at the time, the very first time I heard about it was when they came

with Prof. Q to do the presentation and I had no clue about it before then so I went in very negatively and I was not really part of it.
(Service representative)

I think that there are a lot of positives and that there could have even been more positives if there was more communication but there wasn't – but so far it was good.
(Service representative)

Communication is an essential and critical aspect and is the foundation of effective and sustainable partnerships. Open, frequent and clear lines of communication guided by mutually agreed rules, can be incorporated into the partnership agreement. This communication process should be infused in all stages of partnership development.

Formalisation

It is crucial that all partners be involved in setting the mission statements and goals and in developing the curriculum as involvement like this enhances a sense of ownership and joint responsibility for decisions. The creation of equal organisations that are involved from the formation of the partnership ensures shared ownership and prevents the notion that members are working for someone else's organisation (El Ansari & Phillips, 2001). Community, service partners and the academics alike pointed to the lack of formalisation of the module, which has a negative impact on the delivery of the module. These quotations illustrate this finding:

It would be very good if they could add it to their curriculum then its not like pilot programmes so students are not so demotivated, they will be more motivated because they will benefit from it. (Community representative)

I think that possibly it's very difficult to do that planning with a pilot project such as this, but to allocate the necessary resources both in terms of people and in terms of money to the project otherwise it is quite a tall order. (Service representative)

The lack of formalisation in the form of a policy or contract between the partners was linked to the lack of motivation of students and it affected attendance. This is implied in the following quote:

Students pitch up and then you prepare something, sometimes they don't pitch up and then it's difficult. (Service representative)

The common issues raised by at least two partners were planning, formalisation of the course, student attendance, logistics and communication. Three of these issues, namely planning, communication and perhaps logistics, can be linked directly to the service-learning partnership itself. The issues of formalisation of the module and student attendance will have to be addressed by the academic partners.

Partnership agreements ensure joint and comprehensive planning and coordination involving all partners. Clarifying roles and responsibilities with regard to teaching, administration and supervision is important. Time management, flexibility and communication can support this process. Regular monitoring, evaluation and feedback will complete the cycle and ensure sustainability of the partnership.

Capacity Building

Capacity building and staff development were identified as crucial for all partners as it promotes necessary training. It was found that if adequate training is provided, then the previous findings would be approached in a positive manner and problems would be minimised. Consequently the partnership could be sustainable and effective. This was evident in the following quotation:

Something like service-learning as a study – a field of study is really necessary. We need it in society. We must arrange workshops were we can catch up much easier to unlock the barriers that we are experiencing in the community (community)

Capacity building programmes facilitates equity and reciprocity in partnerships. The sharing of knowledge and resources can lead to a deeper understanding, and respect between partners in order to sustain the partnership

Conclusion

Service-learning serves as an impetus to move higher education in the direction of multi-disciplinarity. When creating a space for students to reflect on broader community involvement, service-learning gives them a sense of how their actions can matter, and they will respond to this challenge.

Through the development of sustainable partnerships between the academic institution, the services sector and the community, many lives (young and old) will be touched in a positive way and improved by this collaboration.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation of service-learning at UWC will aid in the sustainability of partnerships and will facilitate the development of an exemplar for best practice in partnership development through service-learning.

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