Facing Outwards

Engaged Learning at the University of Sheffield
Foreword

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I have had the great pleasure of visiting the City of Sheffield in the early 1990s and then again in spring of 2016. On both occasions I had a splendid time, learning from conversations with friendly and interesting people. During my recent visit, I became acquainted on a first-hand basis with engaged learning projects involving students and faculty at the University of Sheffield and community members. It is important work.

Engaged Learning effectively captures the impressive, indeed inspiring, nature of the partnerships currently underway. These partnerships involving film, urban planning, animal and plant science, and sociology, among other fields, are noteworthy for their creativity, collaborative approach, and sensitivity to the needs of others. At its centre, Engaged Learning provides a convincing case for teaching and research when it connects to and with the community and attempts to make a genuine difference. Mutual benefit for all concerned—students, teachers and community members—is a hallmark of effective academic partnerships. The Sheffield story is replete with projects that examine their impacts and question what they might do better.

Engaged learning and scholarship have, of course, deep roots, perhaps dating from Francis Bacon in the 17th century and his call to create knowledge “for the relief of man’s estate.” The cases here, however, directly draw their intellectual inspiration from John Dewey and his emphasis on learning from and through active engagement and ongoing critical reflection. Dewey argued that knowledge is best created when human beings work collaboratively to solve specific, strategic, real-world problems. “Thinking,” he famously wrote, “begins in... a forked-road situation, a situation that is ambiguous, that presents a dilemma, that poses alternatives.”

The forked-road situation at the centre of this publication is what is to be done to effectively and democratically engage a university, particularly an urban university, with its local community?

In my judgment, this is among the most significant problems of our time, requiring very hard thought and serious, sustained partnerships. In the United States, for example, the extreme poverty, persistent deprivation, and pernicious racism afflicting communities in the shadows of powerful, relatively wealthy urban universities raise troubling moral issues, as well as questions about higher education’s contribution to the public good. It is essential that universities as key anchor institutions with extraordinary human capital energetically contribute to radically reducing the pervasive, ongoing, seemingly intractable problems of America’s cities.

“Only connect!” the evocative epigraph to E. M. Forster’s classic novel Howard’s End captures the essence of the argument. Through genuinely democratic and respectful partnerships with their neighbours universities can make intellectual and societal contributions that simultaneously advance knowledge and learning, educate democratic citizens, and improve the quality of life in communities and cities.

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1John Dewey, How We Think (Boston: Heath, 1910), 11.
Introduction: facing outwards: connection and engagement in learning

Professor Brendan Stone
Director of Learning and Teaching (Outward facing)

“Engaged learning and teaching combines academic rigour and disciplinary knowledge with opportunities for students to learn with and from external partners, ‘real-world’ challenges, and experiences outside the University. It often has as its focus learning from and addressing issues of public concern.”

This publication is a ‘sequel’ to our 2015 book which explored and detailed projects in ‘engaged learning’ at the University of Sheffield, and is best read alongside this earlier text (www.sheffield.ac.uk/als/current/engaged). This time we invited people from inside and outside the University to produce brief reflections which in some way connect with, emerge from, or speak to the idea of an ‘engaged learning’. The result is an intriguing and diverse range of pieces which hopefully will stimulate thought, inquiry and debate. Themes addressed include researching inequality, social accountability in universities, and the value of engaging with ‘epistemologies’ (or ways of knowing the world) which are not primarily academic in their nature. In addition, there are a few further case studies from newer projects.

There are various reasons behind the broadening of focus in this text, and the more flexible brief for writers has highlighted one of these. For, as well as learning and teaching, contributors address questions linked to, for instance, research, public engagement, employability, and widening participation. These foci tacitly emphasise that it is not practical, satisfactory, or intellectually coherent to consider engaged learning – or for that matter learning and teaching per se – in isolation from other aspects of university life. A similar point, which I shall also address, applies to the necessity of considering the diverse ‘external’ contexts in which universities operate and collaborate. However, within universities, what engaged learning reveals, perhaps acutely so, is the interconnectedness of, and flow between, areas of endeavour and concern which often, in practice at least, have come to be regarded as discrete from each other. And as a corollary, it also points to the institutional barriers which may hinder collaboration, stemming the sharing of knowledge and resources, and almost certainly lessening impact.

Thus, we are presented with both challenges and opportunities. The size and complexity of institutions of higher education, and the multiple systems which are needed to manage and govern university life, mean that an overarching and convincing vision which draws together diverse activity, and articulates an authentic
“Within universities, what engaged learning reveals is the interconnectedness of, and flow between, areas of endeavour and concern.”
narrative grounded in the reality of educational life, is hard to realise and implement. At the same time, such a narrative – backed up by new ways of collaborating, sharing knowledge, and acting across boundaries – could (would) be a basis for directing more focused and coherent actions.

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What we need in reality is both a shift in narrative and systems to be developed simultaneously, and for those processes of change to be iterative – learning from and adapting to change as it occurs. Thus, making more connections between different areas of university life will enable the more efficient use of resources, and greater impact, creativity, and collaboration. It will also pave the way for a refreshed conceptualisation of the role of the university. At the same time in order to implement changes in systems and processes an outline narrative is needed so that action is directed according to a plan.

Work in engaged learning both reveals ways we might begin developing a holistic narrative, and points to areas where stronger connections might be forged. As our previous publication highlighted, engaged learning initiatives by necessity often attempt to draw together diverse strands of university life, and are frequently driven by an idealistic vision of the potential of higher education and its institutions. Regarding the former, engaged learning touches on multiple areas of activity including research, public engagement, widening participation, student volunteering, enterprise education, and others.

With reference to research, teaching often flows directly from research, but so too research projects emerge from engaged learning, which itself often entails a ‘live’ research process in which students and communities are actors and participants. The research/teaching nexus is often action-oriented: projects seek not just to understand the world but also to change it for the better. The Westfield project in Urban Studies is a good example of this (www.sheffield.ac.uk/usp/warp), drawing on both traditional research and action research methodologies to assist a Sheffield neighbourhood meet the challenges of renewal and regeneration.

Engaged learning also often connects with outreach/widening participation activity, or creates new forms of it. Examples include Undergraduate Ambassadors credit-bearing modules in the Departments of Animal and Plant Sciences, Mathematics, and Computer Science, in which undergraduates work in schools to act as mentors and role models. In APS, Undergraduates spend ten half days in school observing the classroom learning environment, then, using the insight they have gained, devise and implement educational projects which will benefit pupils and schools. I think also of The Literacy Exchange
“We are prompted to question the divide between assessed and non-assessed types of learning, between credit-bearing and extra-curricular activities, and to consider how a range of experiences are important for students’ learning and their personal and professional development.”
and Achievement Programme (LEAP) (www.storyingsheffield.com/literacy), in which students from three Faculties studied theories of literacy and reading development, and then worked with young people in local schools to help them improve their skills. This project was a collaboration between a range of stakeholders – local government, up to ten secondary schools, the university’s widening participation team, and academics from several different disciplines. And in addition to pedagogy and outreach-type activity, a researcher active in the field of literacy presented her work to students, while also running a small research project tracking the outcomes of the work with the aim of producing further papers. Students participated in the research process – for which their learning journals were an additional source of data.

Through working in engaged ways, we are often prompted to question the divide between assessed and non-assessed types of learning, between credit-bearing and extra-curricular activities, and to consider how a range of experiences are important for students’ learning and their personal and professional development. An outstanding university resource which is sometimes overlooked when we articulate our learning ‘offer’ is our volunteering service, in which thousands of opportunities are taken up by students who often report the transformative effect on their learning and development. Several engaged projects at Sheffield draw on a similar model, with students working on a voluntary basis alongside an academic on an initiative with close connections to their curricular studies. An example of this is Briony Birdi’s work on ‘Supporting Isolated Adults via the Six Book Challenge’ (www.sheffield.ac.uk/als/current/engaged/newer/sixbook-1.521415), in which Masters students from the Information School worked with SAVTE (the Sheffield Association for the Voluntary Teaching of English), providing support for English language learners.

I could go on and give further examples of the connections between engaged learning and other areas of university life. These would include the benefits for students’ ‘employability’, the deepening of their understanding of cultural difference, and the entrepreneurial skills required to work on projects requiring problem-solving in evolving and unpredictable situations. But what should be emphasised here is the importance of drawing together and capitalising on the academy’s diverse existing resources in order to facilitate innovative and challenging learning and development opportunities, and to produce the best possible experience for students who study with us. Such an approach will also enable us to articulate a cohesive narrative in which the academy’s offer to students is described holistically, better expressing how universities offer multiple opportunities for students to create and understand their place in, and contribution to, the world.

“Universities offer multiple opportunities for students to create and understand their place in, and contribution to, the world.”
This kind of thinking has influenced the university’s new Learning and Teaching Strategy for 2016-2021, especially in one of its three central themes: ‘Outward Facing Ethos’. This is described as “preparing students for the world beyond the University through authentic learning which forges connections with communities and external partners”, and refers to a number of areas including citizenship and sustainability within learning and teaching; enterprise, entrepreneurship and employability; high value work placements; internationalisation; the development of cultural agility, flexibility, and language learning; outreach and widening participation. Elsewhere, the strategy emphasizes the importance of students being able to learn outside their discipline, and on providing opportunities to “co-produce new knowledge alongside academics and external partners”.

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Engaged learning is one important asset to the realisation of these aims, and it also prompts us to look beyond the shifting contingencies of the immediate present and reconnect with a vision of higher education as an endeavour aimed at making positive changes in the world while also developing individuals’ abilities and potential. This twin approach to articulating a ‘value’ narrative evades the rather crude binary in which we either see higher education as a public good or a means for individuals to prosper. At its heart engaged learning attempts to create or strengthen ‘communities of learning’, in which students, academics, professional services, citizens and external organisations co-produce knowledge, and often work together to address issues of public concern. At the same time, students are afforded opportunities to acquire and practise skills and qualities which will equip them well for their futures: team working, project management, interdisciplinary research, flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and leadership.

Our previous publication included a set of simple principles for developing engaged learning. It is worth revisiting a few of these here as they have broader resonances and suggest ways forward as we begin implementing the new learning and teaching strategy. Underlying the principles is an understanding that pressures and demands in other sectors, and on communities and neighbourhoods are often quite distinct from those exerted within the HE landscape. Moreover, they recognise the power differentials in collaborative ventures, and direct us to orient our practices ethically and responsibly. Thus, the principle of reciprocity is important, with both partners and university benefiting from engagement, as is co-production, with initiatives being co-developed, and aims and methods agreed on. We need to be responsive to partner-led approaches in which initiatives emerge from community needs and aspirations; and we should aim for sustainability in our partnerships and avoid instrumentalising relationships.

These principles have guided the development of a large scale initiative in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health.
The Social Accountability Project is seeking to influence many aspects of faculty culture by embedding socially accountable practice in a variety of areas. In learning and teaching, students undertake placements with a diverse range of organisations, from small mental health charities to the Fire Service, in order to get a grounded understanding of the social and health needs of local communities. The initiative aims not only to increase students’ understanding of the complex social determinants of health, but also to encourage more health professionals to work in underserved communities. Backed by international research, the Social Accountability Project is also generating its own findings and data, and is attempting to orient activity in the Faculty towards an authentic engagement with local needs. One of the most interesting aspects of the project is how it has incorporated co-production into its governance. Its steering group has an independent chair who has worked in community development, and includes representatives from community organisations as well as experts in co-production and engaged learning from other faculties. In addition, following placements, the project uses appreciative inquiry research techniques in order to gain deep understanding of the experience of partner organisations and students and to use this information to better develop future activity.

As the University begins to implement its new Learning and Teaching Strategy, the Social Accountability Project shows us ways of working which might guide future developments. It is both ambitious and attentive to the details of stakeholders’ experience; it draws together several strands of activity and incorporates a diverse range of expertise; and it has a clear focus on the quality of student learning. Most importantly, the project is underpinned by an inspiring vision of universities as resources for good, anchored in and responsive to local communities yet connected to international networks and knowledge, and producing socially responsible professionals for the future. This vision of universities’ place in the world, and their potential to catalyse positive change as part of their core mission, is, I would argue, attractive to students, staff, and communities, and suggests a way in which, despite the often challenging contexts universities operate in, we can continue to advocate for the transformative nature of higher education.
The problem of scale: five reasons why small is beautiful, too

Briony Birdi

I think few would argue with the view that the student experience can be enhanced by combining the more standard teaching approaches with something more ‘outward-facing’. Adopting an engaged learning and teaching approach can provide the students with more opportunities to engage with, and understand the world outside the relatively controlled university environment. As one of my student volunteers commented earlier this year, ‘I would strongly recommend this volunteer activity to other students. It’s not only about helping people, but also about using your knowledge from lectures in real life. In the meantime, you will gain extra skills and inspiration for your future work.’

So it’s extremely encouraging that a key theme of our new Learning and Teaching Strategy is ‘outward-facing ethos’: I have seen the extent to which students can benefit from looking beyond the University walls and engaging with the local community, both in terms of their own learning, and also in the contribution they are able to make. But I have a concern that in raising the profile of this kind of work as a University-level priority there is a danger that we focus more on increasing the scale of the work than on ensuring the quality of the experience to the students, the partners and the local community.

To explain what I mean, I want to go back to the title: perhaps a surprising choice for someone who is 5’10” tall, but for the last two academic years I have been coordinating an Engaged Learning initiative in the Information School, part of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the following points are an attempt to bring together a few thoughts about engaged learning that relate to my concern with the problem of scale.

1. Let’s not create too much work for our partners. When we work with partners in the local community we are hopefully adding value to the service they already provide, but we shouldn’t underestimate the time and effort required by the partner in working with us. When SAVTE (the Sheffield Association for the Voluntary Teaching of English) approached me in the first instance, they set a maximum number of eight students to work with, because of the time it would take to set up the relevant volunteering opportunities, and presumably because at that stage to them we were an unknown quantity as a project partner! It would have been entirely unreasonable to insist at that point that we send more students, so a highly motivated group of eight put themselves forward as volunteers in the first year.
Smaller groups lead to deeper learning. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) shows us that we learn by observing what others do, encoding and then replicating their behaviour. With a large group this can be difficult to achieve, but with a smaller group we can provide more opportunities for reflection, where students bring their own experiences to the learning, engage in critical thinking and, ideally, in deeper learning. A significant aspect of engaged learning is that it needs to give students the time and space to apply what they see to their own situations, and to start modelling that behaviour themselves. This requires time and effort on the part of the learners.

If you don’t want to do it, you probably shouldn’t. The volunteers who have worked with me over the past two years have been highly motivated, and have attended sessions at the busiest times of the academic year, successfully juggling part-time work, study and their volunteering. A project involving an external partner is not only a learning experience for the students, it’s also a commitment to provide support to another agency, and requires a professional attitude at all times: if a coursework deadline approaches and a volunteer decides not to attend a particular session it will let people down, and may even threaten the future of the partnership.

It takes time to do these things properly. There is no doubt that the benefits of an engaged learning project can be significant to the University, in terms of engaging with the local community, working with new partners, adding value to existing Masters programmes, seeing students who are motivated and enthusiastic. However, it takes time to (for example) coordinate DBS checks, arrange an information session, develop and deliver cultural awareness training, and generally oversee the project, liaising between the volunteers and the organisation.

Students are busy people. Related to the previous point, we shouldn’t underestimate the impact of any volunteering opportunity on the students themselves. They are very likely to have a part-time job, they are busy attending lectures and completing coursework, and they have lives to live – so we need to beware of asking too much of them while they’re here.

I am a strong supporter of all outward-facing curricula in principle, and have seen for myself how they can really enhance the students’ experience while they are here with us in Sheffield, and certainly my own experience of engaged learning applied to a vocational discipline has been very positive indeed. But let’s be a little cautious before we launch straight in and assume that all students will benefit from participating in a new initiative, or that all modules now need to include a new form of assessment. Why not start small, testing an idea and then finding a workable model? In my experience one size does not fit all in engaged learning, but requires time, commitment and flexibility from the partners, the students and the members of the local communities, in order to develop a truly outward-facing learning experience.

Briony Birdi is a Lecturer in Librarianship at the Information School.

A view of Sheffield

Kimberley Marwood and Paul Evans
Kimberley Marwood and an artist, Paul Evans, worked together on a project called ‘On Shared Ground’, linking communities in Sheffield, Cardiff and Aberdeen. Through a variety of artistic methods including writing, drawing and photography, the ‘On Shared Ground’ project researched community representations and understandings of Wincobank Hill in Sheffield, Caerau in Cardiff and Bennachie in Aberdeen.

AN ACADEMIC’S VIEW

This is the view of Sheffield from Wincobank Hill. Looking East you can see the City and the University, to the West, Meadowhall, Tinsley, and Rotherham. It is a view of the city I had never seen.

Wincobank is home to the Flower Estate, the first social housing development outside of London. It is also the home of Wincobank Hill, a Roman hill fort and scheduled monument. I went to Wincobank to work with a community group to explore differing interpretations of the hill fort and its meaning for local residents. I had researched the area online, in books, in the City Library and Archives. This gave me an understanding of the site and its archaeological significance, the historical facts and their various interpretations. What I didn’t know was how the hill fort was used and understood, misused and misunderstood by the communities that lived there. These narratives are not captured in traditional modes of research.

An engaged approach to heritage involves the coproduction of stories and histories of a place with the people who live there. As Engaged Learning shows, this approach can be transformative, mutually beneficial and contribute to positive change within communities. The story of Wincobank Hill and its heritage can’t be written using traditional methods – on my own using books and archives. Yet there are embedded prejudices regarding academic research and approaches to learning which privilege certain forms of knowledge. Hierarchies remain between ‘academic-led’ or institutional research and ‘grass-roots’ research conducted in, with and by communities.

Increasing attention on social responsibility and the public role of the University is exciting and encouraging, and the boundaries between the University and the community are becoming increasingly blurred as knowledge is generated in new spaces – in church halls, at kitchen tables, or on top of a hill. But this work requires commitment. As students and staff in these projects we represent the University but are also agents in a series of communities where we live, work and learn. Engaged learning does not start at 9 and finish at 5, is not contained within a classroom, contingent on funding or its alignment to University strategic priorities, but is reliant on relationships, the investment of time, and the desire to create new knowledge in equitable ways.

Kimberley Marwood has worked as a Research Assistant at the University of Sheffield and is now a Project Officer working in Digital Engagement, Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching, and Public Value.

Paul Evans is a contemporary artist based in Sheffield.
AN ARTIST’S VIEW

I have a photograph that shows the view from Caerau hill fort in South West Cardiff, framed by trees.

When I took this photo, I imagined that this view would be very similar to the view from Wincobank Hill in North East Sheffield – and my belief in this mental picture was supported by my knowledge of certain outstanding geographical similarities between the two sites. Both feature Iron Age earthworks; both overlook substantial water courses (the River Ely in South Wales, the River Don in South Yorkshire); both are situated within sight and sound of major roads (the A4232 and the M1) and both sites straddle ancient natural ridge-ways that have been affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by modern civil engineering projects.

I have been a resident in Sheffield since 1980 but I hadn’t actually visited Wincobank Hill until I joined a community group for a walk on a hot summer’s day. We walked up the Roman Ridge, out onto the football fields near the memorial to the ‘Star Crossed Queen’, and past the ‘Posh Pillar and Her Daughters’ sculptures by Brian Fell. We talked about the BBC putting in the cobbled road for snooker broadcasts and about gun emplacements on the hill during WW2.

Then a view appeared, again framed by trees, of a landscape that was immensely familiar but at the same time rather strange. It could have been a mirror image of the view from Caerau but it was also a view of the city that I have known, and grown to love, over the past 32 years: Sheffield from a different viewpoint. The view, just like the view from Caerau, revealed layer upon layer of history, industry and habitation, deposited like river sediments over the course of more than 3,000 years. Here in bygone days, just like in South Wales, someone might have stood and looked down to see the same river winding across the land – and they might also have had memories that identified this place as ‘home’.

Looking down from a high place like Wincobank Hill gives us a new perspective on the familiar terrain that we occupy. Elevated ground also provides us with a regenerative ‘breathing space’ above the frantic confusion of contemporary life. Both Caerau and Wincobank serve as play areas, sites for contemplation or physical exercise – and they also offer fresh opportunities to connect or re-connect with nature. These lofty viewpoints do not result in the psychologically alienating sense of distance that we feel from an aeroplane – on a hill we are still tethered to the ground.
“If we stand in each other’s footsteps then we might all see the same views from these hills, but we all see them through the quite separate lenses of our own personal memories and experiences.”

If we stand in each other’s footsteps then we might all see the same views from these hills, but we all see them through the quite separate lenses of our own personal memories and experiences; even for a West Midlands blow-in such as myself, three decades of life in this place – the city of Sheffield – lends powerful personal meaning to the view from Wincobank Hill ... and my memories of Caerau and Ely, and the communities that have welcomed me in with such grace and warmth, continue to grow and become more and more special with each visit.

This is the high ground that we share or have shared throughout time with others from our community; we can learn so much about where and how we live by looking down, taking stock, getting a fresh view of the landscape.
“You don’t get out much, do you”. Or, the poverty tour

Rowland Atkinson

The accusation of being an ivory tower academic is a painful one, yet ‘getting out’ can also mean we look like we are seeing the lives or places of the poor and excluded as somehow different, wrong, abnormal even. Doing research on poor Scottish housing estates the strong sense that I often came away with was how keen people were to present life as very ordinary, despite what the crime, education and health statistics told me. Should I accept this insider’s view or impose some other designation – that the area had deep problems? If I didn’t use the language of exclusion or poverty how would those with power over resources know that these were areas and people that desperately needed the investment of public resource? Alternatively, were the people of these places going to be further stigmatised and included by precisely these labels? The moral bind seemed impossible to break through.

The last thing that any university sociologist can bear is the charge that they don’t know how ‘it’ is out there, that they are out of touch. Certainly the abstractions of statistical models, surveys and the promise of ‘big data’ continue to push us away from real-world experience. So how can we better see the world around us, understand how it works, who lives there and the problems it holds? To understand social problems, to really work in such a way that we might change the world for the better, we need to get into it, watch how people act in practice and talk to them. But doing this also presents a problem – whether we stay in our offices or get out into communities it is easy to see what social researchers do as a kind of voyeurism. The spectacle of poverty, if we might call it that, is something that generates huge interest from those not immersed in its hard reality. Similar things can be said of dangerous places where we see organised poverty tours alongside the forays of researchers, only for both to return to the safety of life in included or mainstream society.

Is this a fair assessment? What would happen if we voted with our feet and joined as activist neighbours in such communities? More provocatively - would we be helping or taking advantage of low-cost housing as middle-class gentrifiers? I have been on numerous tours of public housing across the world, often organised as part of a conference and as much as I felt enriched and educated by these experiences it was sometimes hard to shake the feeling that these visits presented places as human zoos where residents were unable to decline access in the way that professionals can via secretaries or closed doors. The question this raises is how are we to know the world and its problems in order to do something about them without exploiting or degrading those we are trying to help? We need to avoid the naïve position that if we can relay the voices of the excluded to the powerful we will improve the conditions or resources of the excluded. While things have
“To understand social problems, to really work in such a way that we might change the world for the better, we need to get into it, watch how people act in practice and talk to them.”

got better to some extent over the past five decades since the Community Development Programme the problems of poverty and exclusion remain with us. The more I reflect on the nature of research the more I see that that its real promise is less about the potential for change and more about the need to present problems as an unpleasant intrusion in the conscience of the powerful. There is something to be said for all politicians having to visit the kind of places and talk to people that would rarely figure on their own social circuits. The trick for researchers, it seems to me, is in finding the ways and means by which their encounters can be made to show the contradictions of poverty in a nation of plenty so that it is seen as morally untenable. To do this we still need to get out and about, but we need to think carefully about how and why we do this.

Rowland Atkinson holds a Research Chair in Inclusive Society in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning.
Digging with the squat pen

Ryan Bramley

It’s been two years to the month since our funding bid for ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’ was accepted by the University of Sheffield – and my pathway into Engaged Learning began. It’s now May 2016, and the second-year English undergraduate who was about to make his first film now sits with a First-Class Honours degree to his name; a English Literature Master’s degree in progress; and an ESRC-funded doctorate, “Filmmaking as a Community-Building Practice”, lined up for October.

And yet, the Born of Coal film is still, almost always, the point of reference. Whenever I’m given an introduction to new people, the greeting, “This is Ryan Bramley, he made a film about the Barnsley miners”, tends to be the odds-on favourite. I remember, back in September 2015 – I was back on campus again for the Master’s, and the film had been released online the month before – being amazed by how many people, staff and students alike, approached me to say they had watched the engaged learning film, and to share their thoughts with me on it. To this day, those conversations are still continuing to happen.

When I first heard the term “engaged learning”, I could probably be excused for believing that working with communities as external partners over the course of a project was the engagement being referred to. The impact of engaged learning is not just limited to those who are directly involved within it. It allows research to be shared with the wider world, tearing down the so-often elitist barriers of academia and dismantling the proverbial ivory tower. That is a hard thing to do. Engaged learning initiates original discourses between new audiences, and connects researchers to both novel people and novel ideas – just as my film did, in leading me towards a PhD in Community Representation.

Calling Born of Coal “my film” always makes me twinge, though. Yes, the idea was mine – crafted and tempered through the supervision of Dr David Forrest and Professor Brendan Stone. But the film itself is, narratively, as much a product of my interviewees and their hard work, as it was my own. It’s a point about “hard work” that I really want to drive home here. Proudly from a working class background myself – my father, a metal fabricator; his father, a coal miner – cognitively, calling something “hard work” that doesn’t involve physical graft is something I regularly find myself at odds with. Would the hardworking men and women of my hometown agree?

I remember reading the poem Digging by the late, great Seamus Heaney a few years ago. I was drawn as much to those last three lines then as I am today:

_Between my finger and my thumb_  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

Writing our own stories – whether we do so with Heaney’s pen, the printed keys of a computer, or merely with the ink and canvas of our own minds and mouths – is hard work. It requires mental grit, personal conviction, and often, imaginative ingenuity to be able to convey the stories that matter to us to the people who matter, in the hope that those
narratives may matter to them, too. To dig those stories out from our minds, and to then give them the proper air they need to flourish and grow, is a tough task, and one we regularly encounter in our everyday lives. But the fruits of such labours lie in the new roots we connect with one another, through the stories we share and tell.

My work might not make me physically sweat and toil as much as the men who came before me, but it is just as hard a feat to accomplish – and one which, in my eyes, is worthy of just as much acclaim. But, above all, my work is not just mine, but a shared effort between myself and the people I work with. Just as we dig together, we should be praised together as well.

We are all hardworking people, because we are all narrative diggers.

Ryan Bramley is currently undertaking doctoral research at the University of Sheffield.

My commitment to engaged learning

Bill McDonnell

My commitment to engaged learning is a commitment to learning which cannot take place without student immersion in a real-life context – in this case the development of skills as theatre in education actor-facilitators through direct work with children in schools. Without this specific form of social engagement, in which the conditions of professional practice are present, then certain discipline skills and areas of subject knowledge are simply not available.

The course document sets out the challenge of this form of learning in this way:

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

Inquiry-based learning is central to the philosophy and methods of theatre in education. In inquiry-based learning the focus is on the learning process, on the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’. You will have a decisive say in how the module is taught; in what you learn, and how you learn; in how time is managed; and in how theory and practice are brought together in order to create the programmes. You bring to the course a great deal of knowledge and experience as learners, as researchers, thinkers, organisers and performers, all of which will be the foundation for learning new skills and gaining new knowledge.

COURSE PHILOSOPHY

A theatre workshop should be a model of reflexive practice. Its epistemological base is learning-in-action. Educator Donald Schon defined learning-in-action in this way:

‘It involves a surprise, a response to surprise by thought turning back on itself, thinking what we’re doing as we do it, setting the problem of the situation anew, conducting an action experiment on the spot by which we seek to solve new problems we’ve set, an experiment in which we test both our new way of seeing the situation, and also try to change that situation for the better.’

Theory becomes useful in the process of reflecting on this reflection-in-action. Theory asks ‘What is it that we are doing when we do this?’ and how does this ‘doing’ relate to the wider field of educational theatre practice?
THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

1
Clarity of Aims. Whereby we pay ‘substantive attention to the specific problem’ – what are the aims of our shared work? How are they to be achieved? Through what structures and processes?

2
Particularity of help and support – how do I find the way of doing things, the forms of words and encouragement, which will help this specific child or this specific group, find what they are searching for, crystallise the understandings they have come to, recognise the value of what they have done?

3
How do I work in ways in which defensiveness is minimised: in which I can be myself, open and authentic? In other words, be in a state in which the focus is not on my status, but on the achievement of shared goals and understandings.

Such an approach is founded on values, not methods.

Bill McDonnell is a Senior Lecturer in the School of English.

THE PARADOX OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

“the experience of the students in any reflective practice is that they must plunge into the doing, and try to educate themselves, before they know what it is they are trying to learn.”

Donald Schon
Intervention by stealth

Charlie Pritchard-Brennan

When you’re 15, there’s probably no word that you dread hearing more than ‘intervention’. That word, in England’s secondary schools, has moved away from its common connotations of helpful actions by people who love you and become something much more punitive. Intervention often means identifying the children who aren’t performing highly in maths or English; these children often feel uncomfortable with those subjects and actively dislike them. Once identified, the children are removed from ‘non-essential’ subjects in order to do more maths or English. They’re often removed from the subjects that they love and enjoy. Often art. Often PE. Often IT.

Intervention is an uncomfortable requirement in most schools. It seems cruel to take the children away from the subjects that spark their passion, but, it’s inevitably crueller to let them leave school without the qualifications that they need without knowing that you’ve given them every opportunity to pass. So, in my English department we try to do intervention differently. In fact, we try to do it by stealth. We know that the children have passions outside of our subject so we try to find ways to ignite those passions during out intervention sessions – and – we never use the word intervention.

Children are asked to leave their PE lessons to undertake project-based workshops. These workshops are always based around the pupils’ passions – be they art, tech or sports etc. The key to these workshops is
that there is always a tangible outcome so that the intervention seems more real than analysing a poem for an hour. The workshops are facilitated by members of the English department, however the pupils are expected to lead their own projects.

Across the three terms this year we have had groups of pupils working with local footballers to help their reading skills, working out in the local area to develop an oral history project for the Parish Council and working alongside the Alzheimer’s Society to produce a booklet of writing which will be sold to raise money for the charity.

At the heart of all of the projects, the pupils are actually working quite intensively on their reading and writing skills, however because the projects are different and they involve a whole host of learning opportunities (such as: creating films, going on trips and interviewing members of the local community) the level of engagement has been dramatically improved from previous years. The pupils are also connecting with the community around them and gaining skills that they would not normally work on inside the traditional classroom. And for me, it takes away some of the morally uncomfortable nature of taking pupils away from their other subjects because I know that we are affording them a choice of fun and engaged ways to learn.

Charlie Pritchard-Brennan is a secondary school teacher at Ecclesfield School, and an alumnus of the University of Sheffield.
“Be honest be yourself, recognise your own (lived) experiences, be responsive.”
Living Library for Social Work

NQSW Living Library June 15
My Marbles and how I lost them; the wilderness years
Vol2 Oct 14

valuable opportunity to speak to someone directly who was on the receiving end of social work practice

I could have done with my running shoes for this... Jun 15

An old shoe and a used tampon: diaries of a badass bitch
Oct 15

don’t lose passion for your job or become hardened by the system you work in

Definitely worth taking part these people are going to be SW’s of the future Oct 15

Intro Library

Be honest be yourself, recognise your own (lived) experiences, be responsive

Uncertainty & Joy
Oct 15

Young People’ Living Library Oct 2015

Pleasure to be involved... from a service users point of view you get a feel for how they are with people.... Oct 14
Can we do engaged teaching without an external partner? The case of imagining the North

David Forrest

What we are calling engaged learning and teaching tends to be associated with an arrangement whereby staff and students engage with individuals or groups from outside the academy. At its best, modes of expertise and knowledge are exchanged and traditional modes of academic content are enlivened and re-imagined through an interaction with the wider world.

That’s the ideal, but the reality is often quite different. The practicalities of developing a relationship with an external partner can present challenges which are not reflected in the orthodox metrics of academic time, effort and success. A collaboration has to be cultivated, shared principles have to be established, and power balances have to be acknowledged and negotiated to put in place the principles of reciprocity that should drive this kind of work. Without sustained time for doing and thinking, the risks are multiple: disengaged students; instrumental, intellectually incoherent projects; symbolism over change; outputs over process. I’m not suggesting that we should do away with Engaged Learning; rather that it presents significant pressures on our time and energies.

My reflections on the challenges of this kind of work have been brought about partly by practical factors. Last year, I simply didn’t have the time to develop new projects with new partners. Of course, I was still convinced by the transformative potentials of pedagogies which encourage students to engage critically and explicitly with the wider world, but I could no longer deliver these in the ways that I knew. I had to find an alternative.

With my colleague, Professor Sue Vice, I had been developing a number of research projects exploring the representation of the North of England in and through film, television, literature and other cultural forms. As such, we decided to set up a new level 3 undergraduate model in the School of English ‘Imagining the North’, in which students would research the cultural construction of the region.
“It was striking to note how many of the students spoke as ‘I’ and ‘My’, as they seemed to freely but not uncritically converge their academic perspectives with social, emotional, and geographical contexts as sites of knowledge.”

The module then drew on students’ own sense of place as a starting point: beginning with their innate, experientially grounded expertise in the area in which they reside. Although some of our students were from the North of England while others were not, as a learning community they shared a profound investment in the module content – indeed, they lived within it.

We structured the teaching methods to draw on these resources of engaged knowledge. During our weekly hour slot, the students gave the lectures on the module texts and topics, and we then fed back to fill in any gaps and signpost points of learning. Then we’d meet the following day for a two-hour workshop. The first hour might involve some textual analysis and group discussion of the set-reading, but the second hour was often about engaged learning: students were sent outside to find artefacts which illustrated something about their developing theorisations of Northern space and place; they were encouraged to discuss how they constructed and imagined their North, sharing reflections with their peers; and were introduced to and undertook practices like autoethnography, whereby personal experience is re-imagined as a site of learning and a catalyst for research.

These methods were reflected in the imaginative ways in which the students interpreted our somewhat orthodox assessment: a 4000 word, self-proposed research essay. It was striking to note how many of the students spoke as ‘I’ and ‘My’, as they seemed to freely but not uncritically converge their academic perspectives with social, emotional, and geographical contexts as sites of knowledge. I was struck, too, by the myriad ways in which the very live political and economic (re)construction of the North in the post-industrial age, found its way into students’ work, as they recognised that their humanities skills offered rich and distinctive perspectives on contemporary discourse.

On Imagining the North I learnt that our external partners could be our students.

David Forrest is a Lecturer in the School of English.
Moving beyond “achieving competencies” to embedding values of social accountability.

Deborah Murdoch-Eaton

The essential attributes of a “socially accountable” doctor encompass more than an understanding of social determinants of health, and a responsibility to be a competent practitioner. The roles of advocacy and collaborative working within and for communities “they have a mandate to serve” necessitates embedding transformative experiences within undergraduate training that will impact on learning. Since perceptions provide an understanding of the world and are linked to behavioural output, it is essential to stretch, nurture and challenge student’s perceptions and attitudes towards the numerous roles they will play, and responsibilities they may have in their future practice. Placements within community organisations, designed collaboratively between Medical School, learner and the community partners aim to engage learners with the needs of the organisation and the “population they serve”. Outputs should be of benefit to the host as well as engage future doctors in transformative and personal learning. A longer term perspective on impact evaluation is essential, not only on the individual future practitioner but also on the hosting community organisation, and even the university, with potential for enhanced relationships. Gaining a deeper understanding of these perspectives can inform educators and health professions education institutions about gaps in teaching and learning and how to better shape and nurture the desired attributes, values and competencies required of healthcare professionals to appropriately respond to, and serve, the needs of the communities they are likely to serve after graduation.

Deborah Murdoch-Eaton is Dean of Medical Education at the University of Sheffield, and leads the Social Accountability Project for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health. The Project is a major change initiative to involve students and staff in embedding social accountability as a long-term, sustainable faculty-wide commitment and aspiration.

Personally and professionally my involvement with the University has been extremely positive, almost life changing. But much of this is to do with luck, I just happen to have met, and got on with, the right people at the right point of my life. Others have not had the same experience.

Universities are deeply connected institutions: instrumental in the formation of lives and dependant on the health of the society which sustains them. And yet they and their communities often experience each other as impenetrable, irrelevant and inconvenient. If you don’t have the capability to take up the opportunities offered by the University then they might as well not be there. There is a lost opportunity to create knowledge.

An engaged curriculum could address this – could help people and organisations in the community to be equal partners in the generation of insights and knowledge. This would require resources and investment: knowledge does not happen by chance but rather by organisation and process, discipline and structure. These things create the particular sort of mental space that enables academics to do their work. If these things were shared with the community imagine what new knowledge could be created. And we need new sorts of knowledge to live a good common life because our current ways of creating knowledge are not up to the humanitarian, environmental and demographic challenges facing society.

If any of this is true then an engaged curriculum is not a philanthropic gesture. Rather it is core to the very purpose of a University of creating knowledge for the common good.

Graham Duncan is Director of St Mary’s Church and Conference Centre, and The Art House, Sheffield.
Engaged learning and our evolving motivations

India Woof

One of the key challenges involved in any institution-wide project is the transition from a small number of individual academics, working within their own areas, towards a true, widespread adoption of this kind of practice, and it becoming part of our institutional fabric. Working centrally on the engaged learning initiative, I have made a number of observations about motivation - what it is that drives individuals, departments and faculties to do this type of work, and how reasons for doing so evolve in tandem with the initiative as it gathers its own momentum.

Part of the question is why we undertake this kind of work. For the most part, offering engaged learning opportunities involves academics doing more. This means committing extra time to develop and sustain relationships with external partners; expending extra effort developing and getting approval for teaching which often doesn’t neatly fit into a standard box; and often going beyond the original brief with these external communities – these relationships are rarely (nor should we seek for them to be) neatly contained within the University structure of 12 week semesters, and often links will blossom and evolve to offer a variety of collaborative opportunities.

It is clear from my own experiences supporting academics to develop engaged learning activities, and those of others in similar roles, that motivation for this type of work is for the most part internal. Academics who start off down the engaged learning path do so in spite of the above, and are often motivated by a real need – for instance within a particular community or more broadly within society – alongside a genuine belief that exposing their students to these issues will make them better scholars within their subject area and also better human beings. The very nature of this type of work means that often, we go the extra mile purely because we believe it is the right thing for us as a University to do. This brings about questions relating to what the true purpose of a University is, and all of our 26,000 students and 7,000 staff would no doubt offer very different responses to this debate.

“a genuine belief that exposing their students to these issues will make them better scholars within their subject area and also better human beings.”

The real challenge comes, then, when we try to maintain this internal motivation whilst simultaneously extending it by moving the proverbial goal posts in the form of expanding from small scale, individual work to a much larger scale institution-wide project. Things individuals have been doing for years all of a sudden get a title, in this case ‘engaged learning’. Then we follow the classic route of offering support for new initiatives, and often
the longer standing work which is happening (and sometimes buried) in individual academic departments becomes taken for granted. We see a shift in how individual motivation has perhaps changed. The ‘original’ practitioners did this type of work for a variety of reasons, but the main motivational factors were personal and individual, internal. By moving things ‘up’ a level to a more visible, institutional scale, all of a sudden the motivational factors change, and people undertake this type of work not only because they believe in it as a good thing to do, but also because it is recognised, there is funding and support available, and even sometimes because it becomes mentioned in formal documentation – annual reflections and promotions criteria. The potential rewards are no longer simply intrinsic, and sometimes the motivation becomes external.

Finally, the true test arises when the funding ends, the central support moves on to the next priority project, and the risk is that we have lost that original individual, internal motivation which made this type of activity work in the first place. These types of activity still require more, but there is a chance that once the external trigger of funding, support and recognition is removed, engagement falls and we are back to our starting point.

India Woof is a Project Officer for Academic and Learning Services. She has worked with Brendan Stone to develop Engaged Learning, and is now working on the implementation of the University’s new Learning and Teaching Strategy.

 Transition from a small number of individual academics

Towards a true, widespread adoption of this kind of practice.
Reflections on the Animal and Plant Sciences Undergraduate Ambassadors scheme

Jon Graves

The department of Animal and Plant sciences Undergraduate Ambassadors scheme started almost ten years ago inspired by a national initiative to get undergraduates into schools to act as role models. We developed it into a 20 credit third year module that can be taken instead of the dissertation. Undergraduates spend approximately ten half days in school observing the classroom learning environment, then using the insight they have gained through this to devise and implement an educational project.

Students are placed in both primary and secondary schools and fulfil different needs within each of these environments. In primary schools science is usually taught by non-science specialists leading to well-recognised problems. Our ambassadors devise innovative teaching resources that can be used to provide a learning experience to help inspire younger children to take an interest in science. Whilst in secondary schools the emphasis is often on bridging the gap between the learning environment within school and that at university. For example introducing links to recent research and a more student led approach to learning.

It is not easy to find schools willing to engage with the ambassadors scheme. In general primary schools are easier to bring on board as they recognise the benefit of a science specialist providing something extra. Secondary schools are often a bit more reluctant due to their strict curriculum demands and we have to make it clear that we will integrate what we provide with these.

Jon Graves is a University Teacher in the Department of Animal and Plant Sciences.

“The opportunity to work in a professional environment, under pressure and with other people relying on you builds their self-confidence and helps to introduce them to the working environment.”
Reflections on module FCP101 'Integrated Science'

Alistair Warren

Module FCP101 (‘Integrated Science’) has run for about 5 years in the Faculty of Science. It provides students with the opportunity to work on ‘real world’ projects exploring research in interdisciplinary teams. This is what some of them have said about it – in their own words:

“I enjoyed the FCP project as it tackled real world issues that scientists are aiming to answer right now; the project has fuelled my interest in research and my desire to help answer some of these questions in the future.”

“The layout of FCP101 taught me different ways of learning. Learning is not completely about reading and regurgitating but it also includes processing and understanding different ideas. This module has made me become more aware of social issues concerning our society. It has also drastically driven my passion for biomedical science as I realized that in the future, my research would be able to affect many people’s lives.”

“Originally I was not convinced that I would benefit at all while undergoing this module but as I began researching my groups chosen topic and organising meetings I realised how much skill it would require me to develop.”

“...Finally it has aided my understanding of university being more than simply about remembering lecture content, but also about the pursuit of pure understanding derived from not only content delivered by the university, but also by the self motivated research for a topic that I find to be genuinely interesting.”

“The FCP101 module was a unique module that allowed students to look at scientific topics from a new and different perspective. It was also an excellent opportunity to work amongst other young scientists and develop an understanding of important modern-day scientific issues. Due to the fact that it was not a traditional module, it provided an insight into a challenge which reflected those of real-life.”

“In the past, I think reaching a compromise within a group is an easy task. Nevertheless, I realised I was wrong after participating in this project. It was difficult for us to obtain unanimity during discussions. I learned that in order to achieve a consensus, I must avoid being opinionated. Instead, I had to listen to the ideas or suggestions shared by others, and this is a vital part of collaboration too.”

“As an international student, at first, I found it hard to communicate with other due to cultural differences. Through FCP101, I began to understand and respect the different background we came from thus forging friendships between my group members. Working in a team that was made up of people from different courses made me realize the challenges that I would face in the future for example communication problems and working around everyone’s personal schedule.”

Alistair Warren is Professor of Biomedical Science Education and Faculty of Science Director of Learning and Teaching.
‘Everyone teaches, everyone learns’: the mutual benefits of Live Projects

Carolyn Butterworth

We have been running Live Projects since 1999 and, of course, for many years our main emphasis was on the quality of student learning. In recent years however we have started to appreciate the extent to which our external partners are learning too, sometimes with far-reaching consequences on their organisations and the work they do.

We recently decided to delve a bit deeper and explore this ‘mutual learning’ further, enlisting the help of two of our long-standing clients...

We have worked with Doncaster Civic Trust since 2012 on projects engaging people in their local built environment, including; a toolkit for young people, a competition for schools, a careers compendium and designs for the town’s Mansion House.

Blackburn is Open is regenerating the town centre through creative occupation of empty shops and buildings. Since 2013 our students have been instrumental in this through many projects, including; temporary installations, designs for the Festival of Making and proposals for new ‘Making Rooms’ that led directly to £700k of funding to realise the project.

These two clients met with two of the MArch students they have worked with and they reflected together upon what they had learnt:

“The average age of our membership is 70 and because of this time bomb we face an existential threat! To address this we have decided to focus on our education programme and to deliver this we have worked extensively with SSoA.

The process of working closely with the students has given us a new lease of life. It has had a great impact on our membership, leading to great enthusiasm to extend the education programme even further.

So we are learning a lot about architecture, project development and public engagement and also the possibilities that flow from mutually supportive relationships with universities.”

Jeff Prior, Doncaster Civic Trust

“I am used to writing detailed briefs for projects that are outcome driven. However, for the Live Projects I was asked to create a more open brief to start with so the students could help shape the full brief. At first this was slightly challenging for me but now having worked on several projects, this is how I try to approach other areas of my work. I now focus on the collaborative process of brief-building, knowing that this will improve the quality of the outcomes.”
I respect the skills the students have that I don’t, and I understand I have more experience and knowledge of the local context - we are all learning and developing new skills together.”
Claire Tymon, Blackburn is Open

It’s incredibly powerful for our students to hear this direct feedback on the value of the learning that their clients have experienced through Live Projects.

“The learning was mutual – our clients were able to widen their thinking on how to achieve their aims. My experience of live projects has underlined the mutual benefits for client, users, students and the university and it has given me an appreciation of collaboration, setting the agenda for the type of architectural practice I want to work in.”
Jenny Clemence, Y6 MArch

“The catalytic benefits of the learning and impact of live pedagogy carry on for students and clients long after the Live Project is over.”
Dave Gibson, Y6 MArch

We aim to capture the mutual learning of clients and students more holistically in the future to fully understand and develop the wider benefits and impact of the Live Projects programme for all who take part.

Carolyn Butterworth is Senior University Teacher in the School of Architecture.
John is 48, lives in Grosse Point Park, Michigan and has dementia. An artist and former teacher at Detroit School of Arts in the Detroit Public Schools, John was keen to use his skills to communicate insights into his experience of living with cognitive impairment. After making and sending to England his carefully crafted ceramic bowls for the 2015 South Yorkshire Dementia Creative Arts Exhibition (SYDCAE), John was keen to catalyse interest for a similar community-based dementia arts exhibition in Metropolitan Detroit in 2016.

We agreed to link the 2016 South Yorkshire and Michigan events and so when a competition was held among HND students at Barnsley College in late 2015 to select an image for "The Senses" John agreed to use Paul Pye’s winning design for their publicity, too. So began a new chapter in the SYDCAE. I (David) founded the annual event in 2009 as a way of providing a focal point for the local dementia community, as a means by which to showcase the enduring and overlooked talents of those affected by dementia. Each year a theme is decided by a committee of ‘regulars’ and this is publicised by writing to all care homes in the region, other dementia support services and through social and broadcast media.

This is how John came to know about the exhibition. The exhibition is a modest event in terms of scale. There is emphasis firmly on stimulating creative process rather than achieving praise for the aesthetic effect. The exhibition communicates diverse messages about lives lived with dementia including caregivers, family members, and people with a diagnosis of dementia or related disorders. Contributors are not steered towards replicating the ‘safe’, plastic-smiled public discourse of ‘living well’ with dementia, though some people demonstrate that they do just that. Those who say something about dementia through the exhibition do so on the basis of personal experience, congruent with their feelings and aspirations at the time. Some creative art work on show is more mediated than others, with arts and activities coordinators facilitating the production of the work in care settings. These items, however, do stimulate other kinds of questions for those interested in learning more about dementia. The exhibition is inclusive of all artworks which add to the understanding of dementia.

A fellow teacher, John now practices his profession in the public sphere, through leadership of the first Greater Michigan Dementia Creative Arts Exhibition running from June 2016. This series of events includes creative work produced by people in South Yorkshire, just as the Barnsley-based ‘The Senses’ exhibition in May featured work sent by people in Michigan. One of John's contributions is a set of folded credit-card sized 'Time Travel' cards - he sent scores for me to distribute. One is entitled 'Pause' and the other 'Fear'. He created the cards with Katherine Marks, his Speech and Language Therapist. The card shows a man (it is John) in a helmet holding a search light and inside includes messages to those who may read it, raising awareness of how dementia affects him, and we can help by pausing, at his request, to think again about dementia.
Here’s John: “Perhaps my biggest challenges as I deal with dementia are the changes in how I am able to communicate with my friends and family. I look the same as I did before. In casual conversation it seems difficult to tell what is different about my condition. However, when we actually talk about something complicated, new, or exciting I have a difficult time. The cards are most effective with strangers and casual acquaintances. My friends and family in my immediate, day to day, life have the most difficult time with the use of the cards and my condition. There seems to be a proximity ratio regarding the effectiveness of the Time Traveler Cards. Those closest to me seem to have an emotional response rather than a comprehensive, intellectual response. I am fortunate to work with Speech and Language Therapist, Katherine Marks. We are developing a script that I use to prepare people to experience the Time Traveler Cards: ‘I have a type of dementia that makes communication difficult for me. I would like to share these cards with you so that we may understand each other better.’ I believe that my collaboration with David Reid and my opportunity to share my work with SYDCAE in 2015 have given me an opportunity to explore the depth of communicative possibilities through art”.

Katherine adds: “I would just like to say that the development of these cards has been such an inspiring and surprising journey. John uses art to communicate ideas that are not always easy to express. These cards help him, other people with dementia, and also communication partners who may not otherwise know what the communication needs are”.

This educational dimension of the public exhibition is a concern John, Katie and I share. In my connection with John I have discovered a new colleague, an unofficial, honorary and valuable new member of faculty. Dementia is our shared learning space - and what a stimulating place it is too! Oh yes, and since John’s cards have been distributed in South Yorkshire one man with dementia who has read it has now decided to carry this instead of the information card given to him by health and social care practitioners. Apparently, he connected with the imagery of the Time Traveler. Perhaps we could learn more from people like John? Just a thought.

John Wood is an artist living in Grosse Point, Michigan
David Reid is a Senior University Teacher in the School of Nursing and Midwifery
Katherine Marks is a Speech and Language Pathologist - Clinical Fellow based in Michigan
Aaron Claydon was one of the first students to enrol in our Undergraduate Ambassadors Scheme in Computer Science. For 10 weeks, he spent one morning a week at King Ecgbert School, helping to deliver classes in computing. Engaging secondary school students in learning computer programming can be surprisingly difficult; they are not strongly motivated by examples that are typically used in school curricula, such as a stock control system or traffic light simulator.

Aaron’s approach was to teach programming through robotics, using the humanoid NAO robot. Students initially programmed the robot via a simulator, and then had the opportunity to run a program on the real robot. In Aaron’s words, he aimed for an approach that was “something less artificial and a lot more visual, interactive and engaging”.

Guy Brown is a Professor in the Department of Computer Science.
Humanism, democracy and engaged learning

Joshua Forstenzer

In the 16th century, the great humanist Francois Rabelais developed a radical educational ideal in his Abbey of Thelema. In it, there are no one rules, no formal distinctions between teachers and learners. All are invested in the development and maintenance of a micro-society, where all do as they please, and collective life is organised by the naturally harmonizing general will of all. Moreover, men and women live together side by side (a radical notion in the context of 16th century monasticism), drinking, reading, singing, and playing music. The only guiding principle is that humans ought to follow their inner sense of deepest will (from the Greek θέλημα/’thelema’), which Rabelais understands to be fulfilled by learning and self-development.

However, even in such an idealized world, Rabelais still conceived of the Abbey of Thelema as a place outside of society, reserved for the elites, and designed to enhance their ‘knightly’ and ‘maidenly’ features. In this manner Rabelais’s fictional world echoed a rather widespread understanding of the place and purpose of universities in Medieval times.

Since then universities in Western Europe and in North America have opened up to many more people and turned towards their cities and nation-states to serve the needs of their wider populations. In the late 19th century the training of the professional classes (doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers, teachers, etc.) and in the second half of the 20th century the production of economically and militarily useful research have been the primary means for this engagement.

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries saw a further shift towards integration, with the birth of engaged (or service-based) learning. University students were asked to use their knowledge to work with communities in exchange for academic credit. This implies two things: (1) a recognition that learning is more than a merely cognitive activity; and (2) a recognition that knowledge that inheres outside of the scholarly community has epistemic value.

Perhaps nowhere more presciently do we find these points articulated than in the book, Democracy and Education, published one hundred years ago by another great humanist, the American philosopher, John Dewey. In it, Dewey develops the notion of learning by involving one’s self in the functioning of the school, and ultimately of the broader democratic community. For Dewey, learning involves all of the self (mind and body) and is best done when actively engaging in the process of solving real, experienced problems. Learners must then engage as equal problem solvers in their wider communities. Although this type of civic learning enables
“Although this type of civic learning enables the understanding of facts, what it does above all is cultivate the capacity for inclusive and responsible decision-making – arguably, the moral zenith of citizenship.”

the understanding of facts, what it does above all is cultivate the capacity for inclusive and responsible decision-making arguably, the moral zenith of citizenship.

Whether engaged learning successfully develops this capacity in all who participate in it (as learners, community members or teachers) remains an open question. Yet, it remains an educational ideal and a democratic aspiration worth pursuing, for it puts the work of universities squarely where it belongs, namely: in the city.

Joshua Forstenzer is the Vice-Chancellor’s Fellow for the Public Benefit of Higher Education.
To me, engaged learning simply means learning while doing and doing this out in the ‘real world’. It means ‘engaging’ with, or talking to and interacting with ‘normal’ people and communities outside of the university world. Outside partners can include all sorts of different communities including local residents, businesses, the council, etc. In my view, engaged learning serves a great many purposes including: expanding the horizons of both students and outside partners, sharing learning, challenging the students to apply what they’re learning in the classroom, and striving to build relationships between the university and its surrounding communities. This type of learning (and teaching!) is one of the ways in which our Civic University can fulfill its promise to be ‘for the people’- to be socially accountable.

In my experience, students who participate full heartedly in engaged learning projects start to feel a connection to those they’re working with- they begin to build trust and ultimately develop a sense of duty for making a positive contribution and difference in that community. After interviewing the students who had participated in the Westfield Action Research Project (WARP), I realized that those who spent the most time on the project and out in the community, got the most out of the project and actually cared about the residents of Westfield- not just how the project would turn out.

Getting students to care about people and communities sounds like a strange thing to hope for. Shouldn’t this be a given that students go into Planning and Urban Studies because they want to make a difference in people’s lives? Or are they there to simply learn a skill and be employable, not worrying too much about the impact that their eventual
work will have on local people? Is it a simple
transaction of coming to university to learn X,
so that they can earn Y once they graduate?

The subject of fees and the commodification
of education is one that I struggle with. I know
that students now have to pay high fees here
in England, but I am frustrated that this fee
somehow has led to a transactional interaction
between students and the university and can
take out the wonder of learning and the ethos
of using education for good.

Coming from the US and having gone through
University there, I am used to paying for
university (and will be paying it back for the
rest of my life). I have always had high standards
for my education and my lecturers because
I wanted to learn- not because I necessarily
wanted a cost-benefit ratio to be X.

I think that engaged learning is one way
that students can go away from this
commodification of education and go back
to what learning should include- exploration,
experimentation, being flexible, and producing
vigorous academic work that has positive
value for communities.

In order to fulfill their principles and to provide
the best possible education for its students,
Civic Universities need to be at the forefront of
this kind of learning. University faculties need
to recognize engaged learning as a vital part of
their curriculum and then support academics to
undertake this kind of teaching/projects, as well
as making it part of their overarching Learning
and Teaching Strategies.

Marion Oveson worked as a Project Officer on the Westfield
Action Research Project for the Department of Urban
Studies and Planning.

“Students who participate
full heartedly in engaged
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contribution and difference
in that community.”
WARP students going on a walkabout with local residents to look at open spaces and explore how residents felt about those areas and reflect on the potential use or development opportunities they possessed.

This was a great way for students to learn how to: design a set of questions that would answer what they needed to know in order to make some recommendations for those areas; explain themselves and their project - thereby improving their communication skills overall; and realize that local knowledge and expertise was a key part in their project and work.
Annual Westfield Gala 2015.
I think it would be difficult to comment upon how the engaged learning process has been for the students of the University of Sheffield – you’d probably have to ask them about that. However, one of the key aspects of engaged learning and co-production is that of reciprocity – i.e. it has to be of mutual benefit for both the university and the community partners. Therefore, below are just a couple of examples of how working with the students and staff of the University of Sheffield has benefited the Westfield community, from the perspective of two people who have worked with the students and staff at various stages of the project.

At the outset of the Big Local process, the Big Local Partnership had to engage in a period of consultation of local residents to discern how best to use the money for the good of the community. At this stage Lee Crookes, an academic from Urban Studies and Planning, became involved and subsequently brought other staff members and students on board to meet the partnership members – a group made up of local residents and professional people who were passionate about seeing change in Westfield.

It was interesting to observe the initial meetings as a very diverse group of people came together in unusual circumstances and began to tread an unknown path together. We had to learn each other’s language, work with different rules of engagement – the university folk were used to talking, debating, discussing and working towards an agreed outcome, others in the group were more used to having an idea and getting on with it, those with the louder, stronger voice expecting others to fall in with their ideas. It took patience and commitment to get to know each other and trust each other, but as time moved on
“The process of learning each other’s language and understanding the rules of engagement goes on, there is a way to go before it becomes the norm and everyone sees and understands the need and benefit of working together.”
real progress was made both in building relationships (which is really key in getting to the place of doing meaningful work/engaged learning together), and in making progress with the project.

The support and expertise of the students was invaluable in supporting the local residents to engage in community profiling and consultation and then subsequently to collate the results in order to write the first stage of their plan. Being ‘outsiders’ made it possible for the students be objective about the area and the project at hand, their ability to apply knowledge and use the resources available to them enabled the partnership team to look at aspects of the task at hand in a different way and I believe released in them greater aspiration for the project.

The students and staff were also invaluable in assisting with the launch of a new Information Station in the community, which includes a Food Bank and Advice clinic. The students have been a massive help in terms of researching the need for this provision and then researching how other such services operate across the city. They were also invaluable in supporting with the administration required to set up the registered charity. Without the support of the university this project would almost certainly have not got off the ground.

Other projects have included, research into the unused Open Spaces and community assets on the estate and facilitating a Youth Forum to work with the young people of the area to design a plan for one of the unused open spaces. This project has not yet come to fruition but it is within this project that we have seen some of the more ‘softer’ outcomes of the relationship. One of the young people attended the Youth Forum every week, without fail. There was one week where the students weren’t able to get out to the community. However, rather than letting him down, they invited him to the uni to work on the parts of the project that they were working on. They also bought him some tea and gave him a tour of the university campus. He absolutely loved it! As a result he is now considering going to university which he had previously not thought of. This won’t tick any research boxes or gain credits for an assignment but it is a fantastic example of how the university engaging with local community has impacted the life of a young person. Whether he ends up going to uni, who knows – but at least it has opened up his eyes to the possibility of it!

Whether we are talking about engaged learning or coproduction there are, I believe, many benefits both for the community and the students and staff of the university but its not easy, it has to be a long term commitment not just an experiment or a means to getting a paper written! The process of learning each other’s language and understanding the rules of engagement goes on, there is a way to go before it becomes the norm and everyone sees and understands the need and benefit of working together.

Sue Stewart is Reverend at St Mark’s Mosborough. Ryan Wileman leads The Salvation Army in Westfield. They have worked with the University on the Westfield Action Research Project.
Project ACE: Action on Community Energy Efficiency

Mohammad Zandi

1. Promote energy efficiency measures in the built environment in Sheffield’s community.

2. Tackle Sheffield’s fuel poverty problem which exceeds the national average.

3. Evaluate the influence of infrared thermography on improving the effectiveness of energy audits as part of an energy management system.

4. Identify future avenues to expand energy saving measures beyond the Sheffield area.

After food and water, one of the most significant needs of humanity is shelter. Over the years the process of making buildings more comfortable and functional has become a great matter of concern. While climate change has already been present and the regulations in order to tackle it, becoming more and more restricted, the building sector which consumes over one third of total energy has great potential for energy reductions and can play a key role towards sustainable development. However, the lack of awareness of the public for the ways to make a building more energy efficient leads in many cases the raise of fuel poverty. Sheffield is the leading city in the UK with the higher percentage. This was the tinder that the project ACE has been conducted, from a university with strong civic identity.

Project ACE is a brand-new project initiated by the Chemical and Biological Engineering department which aims to progressively tackle energy efficiency problems in Sheffield’s community. The benefits are wide-ranging: lower bills and carbon emissions, greater occupant comfort and improved public health. It also seeks to help to tackle Sheffield’s fuel poverty problem, which is far higher than the national average.

Project ACE brings master’s students face-to-face with key decision-makers. Difficulties faced are real-life, real-world situations which means that even our best efforts can be met with indifference and intransigence. This is what makes the Engaged Learning Program such a rewarding experience; the setting is not the sterile and controlled conditions of a laboratory, but far less certain environments complete with political, financial and community pressures. This is where engineering know-how is put to its sternest and truest test. This is where Project ACE seeks to make its mark, tackling energy efficiency issues by presenting its case with engaging and compelling field data of the highest quality.

Mohammad Zandi is a University Teacher in the Department of Chemical & Biological Engineering.
Life is really a web of decisions and interactions with people and places; all brought together, told and retold, through infinite personal stories. One decision or interaction undoubtedly affects the next. Our students make a big decision in coming to study at the University of Sheffield; some perhaps fighting against all odds whilst others possibly here out of obligation or expectation. Whatever the reason for them being here, how will the experience you provide through their programme of study ripple through the rest of their lives? Have you asked your students how far reaching those ripples are? Do your students have stories to tell of how their educational experience has led to other positive encounters or decisions outside of their studies? Do you know of the true impact of your programme and can you articulate how you want your students to be, think or do at the end of it? What’s your own story and how did your own educational experience impact on what was to follow?

Sarah Hague is a Learning & Teaching Development Manager at the University of Sheffield.
Local/global

Tim Herrick

International students who have come to Sheffield to study education often arrive with optimistic ideas about the UK education system. During their studies, we don’t exactly refute these notions, but we do try and expose students to a wider range of perspectives and experiences than they may previously have encountered. Given the insidious growth of comparisons between national educational systems, it is helpful to reflect that the UK does not have all the “answers”, and that experiences of formal learning may be no less ideal in the UK than they are elsewhere in the world.

A simple-looking method for addressing this difference in perspective presents itself: bring international students on a full-time Masters in Education into dialogue with local learners from different migrant communities in Sheffield - “international students” in a rather different sense. Through existing contacts within the School of Education, we forged links between small groups of students, and members of the Roma-Slovak, Afro-Caribbean, and asylum seeker communities in the city. Their task, shared equally between student and community participants, was to create a digital artefact about their experiences of formal education in the UK. Student participants then created a fourth resource, reflecting on their experiences in this area, drawing together their learning from the project.

“The curriculum co-constructed by learners and community partners is intrinsically outward facing, and seeks not just to create encounters between “the local” and “the global”, but also to demonstrate how complex and intertwined these two categories are.”

What students say they have taken from the experience is this intellectual nuancing of their beliefs about education in the UK; a set of rich personal experiences about meeting learners, and travelling to parts of Sheffield they wouldn’t otherwise have visited; and more practical skills, both about carrying out academic research, and disseminating that in a form other than written work. What participants are likely to have taken is a sense of being heard, of their voices mattering, as well as a closer connection with a local educational institution, and folk interested in learning and teaching across the globe. The curriculum co-constructed by learners and community partners is intrinsically outward facing, and seeks not just to create encounters between “the local” and “the global”, but also to demonstrate how complex and intertwined these two categories are.

Tim Herrick is Senior University Teacher in the School of Education.
Disruption in the library. From hierarchies of knowledge to epistemologies of cooperation

Vicky Grant

Before my current role as Head of Library Learning services at the University of Sheffield I worked for many years as a medical librarian. As part of that role I was asked to train medical students and clinicians in the navigation skills required to find and retrieve research evidence. I attended training courses on evidence based practice and was taught about the hierarchy of clinical evidence, a pyramid which ranks systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials as the best and most reliable form of research evidence. Literature searches could be filtered on the medical database Medline, so students, clinicians and researchers could be sure that they only retrieved positivist studies. Jokes were made about pink and fluffy qualitative research. When I asked if this was a reference to gender I was told that women could do science just as well as men. And I watched them, and they did. Before long the same filters were introduced on the nursing database CINAHL and we were soon showing nurses how to limit their searches to positivist studies too.

On one particular course we utilised an inquiry based approach to learning and were encouraged to search for information on a topic of our choice. The medics on my course searched for the latest research in their clinical speciality. I didn’t have a clinical speciality so I searched for articles on irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a condition I knew about from my own lived experiences. It became somewhat compulsive and I learnt a lot about the way medics understood and studied IBS. I noted how the patient voice was absent from research papers and that when qualitative studies of patient experience were undertaken the patient would be anonymised and their stories would be reduced and themed. Patient stories were transformed into science as quickly as possible and research was only considered to be worthwhile if it could be measured, generalised and incorporated in a clinical guideline.

I would take the articles I had found along to my hospital appointments. “That doesn’t fit with my experiences” I would say. “You have a very questioning mind” the doctors would reply and I’d wonder why this was so unusual in healthcare. Eventually I started to find ways of connecting with other patients. Their stories gave me a much deeper and more profound understanding of my illness. I recovered by reading the stories of patients like me, by writing about and reconstructing my illness...
experiences, by comparing those experiences with the findings of clinical trials and by synthesising different positions to create a new and deeper understanding of my illness.

My new role has facilitated a move into the University’s Information Commons, a library site which, as the name suggest is a common space for people from all disciplines to come together. We work with students undertaking interdisciplinary projects and engaging with the local population, such as through a undergraduate interdisciplinary project called Achieve More. Students from the Faculty of Medicine Dentistry of Health get the opportunity to work with students from Arts and Humanities. Interdisciplinary learning creates space for issues such as patient narrative, medical ethics and the philosophy of knowledge to be discussed.

Evidence hierarchies are breaking down in favour of co-operative inquiries and a broader range of epistemological positions are being embraced. Illnesses such as IBS are complex, contradictory and out of control and are therefore not well suited to reductionist methodologies. By blending a mix of epistemological positions we are much better placed to find solutions to complex health problems and to enable people to live well with conditions like IBS.

Vicky Grant is Head of Library Learning Services and a doctoral researcher.
No barriers to education

Annie Gainsborough

With maintenance grants being scrapped and international students’ rights being weakened, the Students’ Union has been running a yearlong ‘No Barriers to Education’ campaign. As part of this, on 4th November 2015, we took over 150 of our students to the national ‘No Barriers to Education’ Demonstration in London.

But we knew that a demo was not for everyone; there are lots of people that feel strongly about ending barriers to education but would be unable to attend the Demo, whether that was due to a disability, lecture timetabling or many other reasons. As a Union we feel strongly that activism should be accessible to everyone and this is why we wanted to show that there are loads of other ways to make a difference and have an impact.

So on the same day we are held a day of ‘No Barriers to Education’ craftivism, providing a creative response to the scrapping of Maintenance Grants, attacks on International Students’ rights and cuts to the Disabled Students’ Allowance, among other current issues in education. Art and craft can have a massive impact, whether that is through drawing attention to important topics and capturing people’s imagination, finding new approaches to issues, or simply brightening people’s day!

The highlight of the day was joining Disabled Students’ Committee in writing our personal, and often invisible, barriers to education in white crayon on white paper. At the end of the day we came together to splash coloured paint across these pages, revealing the barriers that many of us face. These included the fear of debt and fees, ill health and lack of support, the physical (in)accessibility of our University environment, and the focus on a white, male dominated curriculum.

It was inspiring to see so many groups and individuals taking part who may not have traditionally engaged in education activism. We saw Tea Society (providing solidari-TEA), Expressive Dance Society, Women’s Committee, the Living Wage Campaign and Baking Society come together to put on workshops, share their experiences and learn from each other. In the current climate of drastic changes to (and attacks on) Higher Education, it is so important we continue to develop opportunities like this with our students and that we all take to heart the phrase written at the centre of Disabled Students’ Committee’s collaborative project: ‘Liberate Education Now! Now! Now!!’

Annie Gainsborough was Activities Officer for the Students’ Union at the University of Sheffield in the 2015-2016 academic year.
“Liberate Education Now! Now! Now!!”
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Engaged Learning Sheffield is led by Professor Brendan Stone, with support from India Woof.

To find out more about Engaged Learning at the University of Sheffield, including additional interviews, films, and more, please visit: www.shef.ac.uk/als/current/engaged

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