Critically-Reflective Civically-Engaged Academics Shaping the Future of an Academy Striving for Social Justice

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Who would have thought, 20 years ago, that Ireland in 2015 would have relative peace, returning emigrants, and gay marriage? A lot can change in a country in two decades. So, too, a lot can change in higher education in 20 years. The investment of multinational companies in Ireland has fuelled the demand for a highly qualified workforce; and through State investment in higher education, Ireland has learned how to punch above its weight on a global stage to become a hub for the high tech industry. More recently, the upgrading of the Institutes of Technology to the university level was a response to economic drivers, and a highly educated and skilled workforce was influential in moving the economy away from agriculture toward high-end technology.

Clearly, a demand for change can significantly influence the direction of higher education. This was evident not only in the last two decades in Ireland but similarly in the U.S. during the 1860s with the establishment of Land Grant universities in response to industrialisation and again in the 1940s and 1950s in response to the government’s post-war funding of science and research. Throughout the world, higher education institutions (HEIs) are responding to the demands of commercial enterprise by increasing research on artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and genomics. The Ivory Tower has the potential to respond to whatever is needed by the outside world. But how are these directions determined and by whom? More specifically for the purposes of this essay: How can those members of the academy with civic commitments and priorities who call on higher education to contribute to social justice have their voices heard over the siren song of neoliberal enterprise and technology commercialisation?

Boyer (1994), in the year before Zlotkowski’s (1995) article on the future of service-learning (SL) appeared, set the bar very high in his call for the academy to create a new model of excellence in education, one committed to improving the human condition. I believe this vision of education extends beyond tweaking pedagogy and changing policy at a few institutions. Rather, it is a call for civic engagement to be a vehicle of political change for social justice (see Hartman in this collection of essays). While it is true that in the last 20 years, service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) have been integrated into the institutional missions of many HEIs – and in many this goes beyond lip-service – unfortunately, the level of commitment is far below what it should be and must be if we are to achieve excellence defined as effecting change toward a more just world. Only when an institution can point to structural changes – for example, in the form of major resource allocation – and ideological shifts – for example, in the form of legitimating pedagogies for civic engagement (Boland, 2006) – can it claim to be doing more than talking the talk of engagement (see Saltmarsh, Janke, & Clayton in this collection of essays).

Civically-engaged academics are well positioned to influence the direction of higher education and to move their institutions beyond rhetoric toward significant contributions to achieving social justice. Twenty years ago Zlotkowski (1995) called for SL to be positioned within the curriculum of all disciplines so that the pedagogy would be assured a future in higher education. These developments have been achieved to varying degrees of success, and pedagogies of engagement have become widespread, if not the norm, in teaching and learning. Changes in how we think about learning for citizenship and how we understand HEIs’ role have contributed to the development of SLCE, or perhaps these changes occurred because of expansion and refinement in the practice of SLCE. Given the progress that has been made, rather than continuing to focus on what is needed for the future of SLCE, perhaps we should be looking now at the bigger picture – the purpose of education. Certainly, one could argue that the meaning of education can best be changed by ensuring the next 20 years of SLCE, but, regardless, an important question is: How can the powerful energy of SLCE be harnessed to move higher education more toward achieving social justice and understanding that goal as central to what we mean by excellence in education? I suggest that one way to achieve this aim is for the community of civically-engaged academics (see Dostilio & McReynolds in this collection of essays) to guide the process by critically examining their own engaged practice. By joining together to examine the impact of
SLCE on micro and macro levels, they can achieve greater legitimacy, with a stronger voice that can have more influence on the academy, especially on how we understand the purposes of higher education.

One avenue to do this is within a structured model that facilitates academics to critically reflect with their peers in a supportive environment on their own academic, civic, and personal development and, relatedly, their potential and actual roles as change agents on their campuses and across higher education. Reflection, as both an individual and a collaborative process of critical examination to draw meaning from experience, has been widely accepted as an essential, multidimensional element of SLCE. At the same time, while those teaching SL courses may indeed be reflecting on their engaged practice, it is mostly in an ad hoc, solitary, and self-directed manner. If reflection with others is so central to students’ SL experiences, why is the same kind of growth- and change-oriented practice not encouraged and enabled for engaged academics?

Engaged academics want, as well as need, to reflect on their practice, both on their own and with colleagues, through a variety of methods (Ó Donnchadhha, 2011). The reflection process needs to have a flexible structure and be designed to support delving into the practice and philosophy of SLCE as well as its role in the larger civic enterprise of the academy. As with student reflection, it needs a supportive environment and must occur regularly. It must have institutional recognition or it will be regarded as incidental. I assert that an institution’s commitment to SLCE correlates with the degree to which reflection is nurtured and developed by and for the engaged academics at that institution.

To improve and achieve excellence in any pursuit, it is vital to have a clear understanding of both why we do what we do, and why we do it the way we do. Engaged academics need a forum for addressing these questions together. One structured approach to such a forum is a Community of Reflective Practice (CoRP): a model that facilitates academics to critically reflect with their peers in a supportive environment on their academic, civic, and professional development (Ó Donnchadhha, 2011). CoRP is a general framework, adaptable through dialogue to suit the specific goals, needs, and context of a particular group of academics. It takes the form of a forum for civically-engaged academics who meet on a regular basis (physically or online) to reflect on their practice in an environment that supports development on multiple levels, from the personal to the professional and from the technical to the political. The forum follows a set of guidelines, establishes ground rules for supportive participation, clarifies participants’ roles and responsibilities, and endeavours to meet the needs of the participating academics (e.g., learning how to reflect more deeply, developing space for reflective practice with others, garnering legitimacy for SLCE). The model draws on reflective practice theory proposed by Wenger (1998), Brookfield (1995), Palmer (2004), and Ash and Clayton (2009).

Reflecting on engaged practice at the department level can lead to sharing ideas, avoiding pitfalls, creating new initiatives, and enabling synergies within that department; and it can lead to improvements in practices and higher standards for teaching and learning. Beyond department-level CoRPs, reflecting with colleagues across departments can help influence the role of an institution in and with its communities and can help shift the purpose of the institution in the direction of addressing social injustice through education. It can contribute to establishing a critical mass of engaged academics and give a collective voice to those who wish to be agents of institutional change. Zlotkowski (1995) asks whether we are citizens in an academic community or academics fulfilling a civic purpose in the community, but the bigger question concerns the role of the academy in a democracy. The CoRP provides the opportunity to examine engaged practice at a micro level – for example, evaluating how a particular SL course is impacting a community partner. It also affords the chance to examine practice at a macro level – for example, focusing on the impact of the institution in the locality, or the role of a single academic institution in advancing social justice on a national level.

Engaged academics generate new knowledge and improve practice to promote excellence in the use of engaged pedagogies through formal research, and a CoRP can contribute meaningfully to this undertaking in a variety of ways. A CoRP can articulate research questions, identify relevant theory and data, and connect potential collaborators. It can conduct research on engaged practice and hold participants mutually accountable for high quality in their scholarship. It can champion the academic legitimacy of such research. And, perhaps most importantly, it can support engaged academics in learning about themselves as researchers and educators and in growing into the scholars they want to be. The work of SLCE involves head, hands, and heart, and while rigorous research on engagement must examine theory and practice, there is also a need to look within; paraphrasing Morrison (2015): engaged academic, know thyself (p. 53). Such deepening of self-knowledge starts with personal introspection on practice and moves from the practical to the political, posing not only the question “Am I doing it right?” but also the question “Am I doing right?” Illuminating the many facets of the engaged academic’s identity and purpose requires ongoing reflection, and a CoRP is well
suited to support such a process.

To raise the standing of pedagogies of engagement we must re-define rigour and sophistication of thought as well as engaged academics’ responsibilities, productivity, and excellence. The standards guiding such changes will be context-specific, and so could be different even in geographically neighbouring institutions or similar in institutions continents apart. The conversation about these topics must have a forum, and reflecting on these issues with fellow critically-reflective civically-engaged academics is a possible option. While some of these issues can be addressed in other contexts – for example, academic conferences – the focus of such gatherings is usually on the academic or professional development of attendees. Civic and personal development could be more effectively cultivated at conferences if the collaborative, reflective process were already happening in supportive environments on campus, with academics practicing the skills of critical reflection with local peers.

Though the quality of SLCE in and across HEIs may be debated, SLCE is no longer on the margins of higher education and has become, at least in principle, conventional enough to be a guiding ethos for many HEIs in Ireland, the U.S., and elsewhere. The Hunt Report, published in 2013 by the Irish Higher Education Authority, emphasised the need for greater involvement by the wider community in the development of the academy over the next 15 years. One positive outcome is that 14 of Ireland’s 22 primary HEIs have signed the Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement (Campus Engage, 2014), a ten point agreement to promote the common good through SLCE, campus outreach, knowledge exchange, and social inclusion. This charter is soon to be replicated in numerous other European countries through Europe Engage, a project to network European civically-engaged HEIs (Campus Engage, 2015). Notwithstanding the positive steps forward, research on Irish civic engagement (Boland, 2006, 2014; Lyons, 2012; McKenna & Martin, 2014) has identified some of the challenges of embedding pedagogies of engagement firmly within HEIs, including limited financial and time resources, lack of institutional recognition, the need for a deeper understanding of reflection, time commitments required for relationship building, and issues regarding terminology. Crucial to dealing with all of these issues is the need to examine the role of civically-engaged academics in promoting social justice.

If mobilizing higher education to strive toward social justice locally and globally is the objective of civically-engaged academics, then the use of pedagogies of engagement can be seen as a political act. Achieving political impact – by advancing social justice through SLCE – is an indicator of excellence in education. SLCE cannot change the world, but it can change people, and people can change the world. While pedagogies of engagement may produce extraordinary results, it was worth striving over the last 20 years to make them ordinary – to the extent that engagement is now mainstreamed into the academy. Now, we need to strive for excellence and change on our campuses and in the world at large. Critically-reflective civically-engaged academics can and should lead the way.

Note

1 The word corp pronounced /korp/ is the Irish word for ‘body’ derived from the Latin corpus. As well as an acronym, it is also used for its figurative reference to an active, thinking, feeling organism or a collection of people or a body of knowledge.

References


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