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Embedding notions of community in the teaching-research nexus: A case study

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Embedding notions of community in the teaching-research nexus: A case study

Abstract

Becoming aware of the variety of ways academics and students experience and apply research in higher education empowers higher education providers, policy makers and academics to become more reflective and critical of the environment in which learning is taking place. Significant shifts in commerce higher education pedagogy that value community engagement as a bridge to holistic education and sustainable social change are taking place. With the increasing need to integrate the community into the teaching-research nexus, social responsibility is moving to the forefront of commerce higher education. The paper is based on the findings of a teaching and learning scholar research project on embedding notions of community in the teaching-research nexus among commerce academics at a regional Australian university. We examine how research knowledge in commerce faculties can generate socially innovative outcomes that meaningfully benefit a wider set of stakeholders in the community. A teaching and learning innovation in assessment development in a third year commerce undergraduate subject is analysed as a basis for discussion and evidence for recommendations.

Keywords

Embedding, notions, community, teaching, research, nexus, case, study

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Embedding notions of community in the teaching–research nexus: A case study

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Becoming aware of the variety of ways academics and students experience and apply research in higher education empowers higher education providers, policy makers and academics to become more reflective and critical of the environment in which learning is taking place. Significant shifts in commerce higher education pedagogy that value community engagement as a bridge to holistic education and sustainable social change are taking place. With the increasing need to integrate the community into the teaching–research nexus, social responsibility is moving to the forefront of commerce higher education. The paper is based on the findings of a teaching and learning scholar research project on embedding notions of community in the teaching–research nexus among commerce academics at a regional Australian university. We examine how research knowledge in commerce faculties can generate socially innovative outcomes that meaningfully benefit a wider set of stakeholders in the community. A teaching and learning innovation in assessment development in a third year commerce undergraduate subject is analysed as a basis for discussion and evidence for recommendations.

Keywords: community, teaching–research–community nexus, social innovation

Introduction

The paper reports the findings of a Faculty Teaching and Learning Scholar project at a regional Australian university. The aim of the Scholar project was to lead a faculty-based initiative during Spring Session 2009 among commerce academics to promote the development of assessments embedding notions of community in the teaching–research nexus. A key aspect of the project was the application of the teaching–research–community nexus model.

This paper explains its application in a third year commerce undergraduate subject, International and Comparative Human Resource Management (Spring, 2009). As corporate collapses around the globe continue unabated, and social responsibility moves to the forefront of commerce higher education, the increasing need to integrate the community into the teaching–research nexus has become evident. Within a discipline based context, this paper examines how research knowledge in commerce can generate socially innovative outcomes that meaningfully benefit a wider set of stakeholders in the community.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we examine the notion of the teaching–research nexus and the perceptions of the nexus held by academics and students. Then, the paper proposes the need for extending the existing teaching–research nexus model to include the community element in teaching and learning commerce. The notion of social innovation is introduced as a viable facilitator of this community element in commerce subjects. Next, we present the findings on the application of the socially innovative teaching–research–community model, and conclude by discussing its implications to student learning outcomes and community.

The teaching–research nexus

In an era where the university landscape is becoming increasingly competitive, with increasing expectations not only to teach but also to create knowledge, the need to bridge the link between teaching and research has become a priority both nationally and internationally. The current focus on engagement is visible with the increase in coalitions such as the Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) which is committed to:

furthering the understanding, development, promotion and resourcing of effective management and knowledge exchange between universities and their communities (in Walkington & Vanderheide, 2008, p. 3).

Mission statements of universities are embracing community engagement as a way of providing students with access to experiential learning approaches to better equip them for life outside the university. The nexus has been advocated by academics as a means to produce distinctive environments to encourage student engagement in learning communities.

There is extensive literature about the relationship between teaching and research, and its centrality to higher education. In creating a synonymous relationship between higher education and the teaching–research nexus, much discussion has been formulated around the very definition and its application. Jenkins (2004) defines the teaching–research nexus as a singular relationship that comprises multiple links between teaching and research. For Krause *et al.* (2008) also, the teaching–research nexus has come to signify “a concept that comprises multiple links between teaching and research” (p. 9). Discussions have evolved from what constitutes good research and good teaching, to fostering learning and knowledge generation (Friedrich & Michalak Jr, 1983; Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Ramsden, 1992); benefits and concerns of research in teaching (Elen, Lindblom-Ylance & Clement, 2007; Healey, 2005; Krause, Arkoudis & Green, 2007; Turner, Wuetherick & Healey, 2008), and how the teaching–research nexus can be strengthened (Baldwin, 2005; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Jenkins, Healey & Zetter, 2007). Much of the existing research has focused on whether the most productive or accomplished researchers (for example, gauged by measures of output such as citation indices) are also the most effective teachers (for example, measured by course evaluation scores given by students) (Griffiths, 2004). For the purposes of the discussion presented in this paper, the relevant literature on the teaching–research nexus can be examined through academic and student perspectives.

From the academics’ perspective, Boyer believed the work of university teachers was enriched, rather than restricted by its singular predecessor, research (Healey, 2005, p. 190). Boyer’s (1990) work helped to bring teaching, scholarship and research together through what he terms the four forms of scholarships: scholarship of discovery, engagement, integration and teaching. These four individual yet overlapping areas recognised teaching as an activity

which encompasses more than the transmission of knowledge and that an in-depth understanding of knowledge creates a more accurate snapshot of the complexity of the nexus. Elen *et al.* (2007) and Krause *et al.* (2007) also provide invaluable insight into the nexus debate.

Elen *et al.* (2007) found:

by being involved in research, they [academics] demonstrate that knowledge is continuously evolving, continuously challenged and changing. By being actively involved, research brings knowledge to life ... academics in research-intensive universities seem to argue that the optimal teaching approach is one in which students can actively participate in the knowledge development process (p. 132).

The ways in which students' experience research in higher education is a significant initial aspect of maintaining and enhancing a close relationship between research, teaching and learning (Robertson & Blackler, 2006). These researchers point out that academics need to consider the different ways in which "students 'meet' research and build this explicitly into the curriculum" (Robertson & Blackler, 2006, p. 218).

However, a landmark meta-analysis study conducted by Hattie and Marsh (1996) showed there was no correlation between teaching and research. This view was also supported by an earlier study conducted by Friedrich and Michalak (1983) where they found a zero relationship between these two variables. Although Hattie and Marsh did not find a positive relationship between teaching and research, they did not find a negative relationship either. While a clear understanding of the relationship between teaching and research has not yet been identified, this can in part be due to "the complex issues associated with measuring both dimensions" (Krause *et al.*, 2007, p. 7). Healey also built on the Hattie and Marsh study (1996), claiming:

whatever the view taken on the strengths and limitations of their (Hattie & Marsh 1996) analysis, their conclusions suggest that for students to gain the most from the links, attention needs to be given to the design of the curriculum and how students learn (Healey, 2005, p. 1).

From the students' perspective, researchers have begun to move away from the nexus as a way of evaluating teaching success, to look at the ways in which the nexus can benefit students and strengthen their learning outcomes. For example, Turner *et al.* (2008) along with Robertson and Blackler (2006) and Brew (2006) explore student conceptions of the teaching–research nexus in higher education. They report unquestionable benefits, from a student perspective, of the presence of such a nexus. Most notably, Turner and colleagues' study report that a significant portion of students from the research-intensive universities studied reported "learning best when involved in their own projects" (Turner *et al.*, 2008, p. 207). For Brew (2006), there are two key benefits gained from undergraduate students engaging in research projects; the professional and personal gains that become accessible, and the "intellectual development in thinking and working like a researcher" (Brew, 2006, p. 219). More recently, Brew (2009) has recommended that students need to be immersed in an environment where learning is based on the most recent research findings.

The importance of community in teaching and learning

While the notion of four facets of scholarship brought forth by Boyer and his colleagues in the early 1990s has been positive in promoting the multi-faceted role academics play in the teaching and student learning process, academics have sought to integrate scholarship to encompass all four facets into what is termed by Yapa (2006) as “public scholarship”, defined as “scholarly activity generating new knowledge through academic reflection on issues of community engagement” (Yapa 2006, as cited in Krause *et al.*, 2008, p. 24). Researchers such as Kreber (2001) and Braxton *et al.* (2002) introduced the elements of public knowledge, peer review and community use into the teaching–research nexus debate. Furthermore:

as universities and governments emphasise the importance of community engagement and knowledge transfer, there may be scope for giving serious consideration to approaches such as public scholarship as a way of integrating not only teaching and research, but also community engagement and knowledge transfer activities (Krause *et al.*, 2008, p. 24).

It is in this context that we propose an extension to the teaching–research nexus, that of the community. Central to our argument is the lack of attention given in the current conception of the nexus to the context of the teaching and learning process. The teaching and learning process between academics and students takes place in an environment where both parties’ ideas, values and beliefs are shaped by an ever present and evolving community environment. Not recognising the context of this teaching and learning process can result in producing teaching and learning outcomes that are lopsided and detrimental to the long term wellbeing of the members of the community. For example, by over emphasising the profit motive in teaching and learning of commerce and business courses, commerce academics are charged with neglecting the community impact and contributing to the continuing corporate failures, corruption and the recent credit crunch. Wharton Business School’s influential MBA student interventions in India (Prahalad, 2002) demonstrates how extending the teaching–research nexus to engage the students with the community could meaningfully contribute to the wellbeing of the members of the community. This idea of sharing and reciprocity, while embedded in the mission statements of several universities, needs to become more actualised rather than assumed within course development, curriculum and research projects. The addition of community into the teaching–research nexus will not only help higher education providers meet their aims as outlined in so many mission statements, but will also enrich the nexus by adding an engagement element through which knowledge can be pragmatically and meaningfully realised, benefiting a wider set of stakeholders.

The faculty scholar project and its case study

The main project outcome was to develop an integrated model on the teaching–research nexus for socially innovative teaching and research in the Commerce faculty and to assess its usefulness in the teaching and learning of commerce subjects. The project examined published research related to the topic and documented the process of designing assessments which will promote the teaching–research nexus.

In the teaching and learning of commerce subjects, social innovation has become a powerful and effective way to inspire and motivate universities, academics and students to experience the teaching–research–community nexus. In a radical rethinking of business education, universities have launched innovative and interdisciplinary commerce degrees integrating

“socially innovative commerce” – an attitude of respect and responsibility towards people and the planet. Social innovation assumes a reality where ultimate good in society can not only be imagined, but also created. The outcome of social innovation can be an initiative, product or process that changes beliefs, routines, resources and authority flows of any social system towards greater resilience. From this perspective, socially innovative teaching and learning offers a powerful way to enact the teaching–research–community nexus in commerce. Based on the above, the Faculty Scholar Project generated the Socially Innovative Teaching–Research–Community model (Figure 1).

At the core of this model is a need for assessments to be developed using one or more of Healey’s (2005) four “ideal types” of teaching and course design: research-tutored (curriculum emphasising learning focused on students writing and discussing papers or essays); research-based (curriculum emphasising student undertaking inquiry-based learning); research-led (curriculum structured around teaching subject content); and research-oriented (curriculum emphasising teaching processes of knowledge construction in the subject). As conceptual lenses that can pragmatically direct teaching and course design, one or any combination of these “ideal types” could promote social innovation.

With an emphasis on social innovation, research within commerce could mainly be directed at addressing how stakeholders represented in the subject content (such as institutions, managers, employees, shareholders, government and community members) could address unmet social needs of the community. The process of meeting some of the unmet social needs with innovative solutions that engage the practitioner from industry, the academic and the student completes the socially innovative teaching–research–community engagement process.

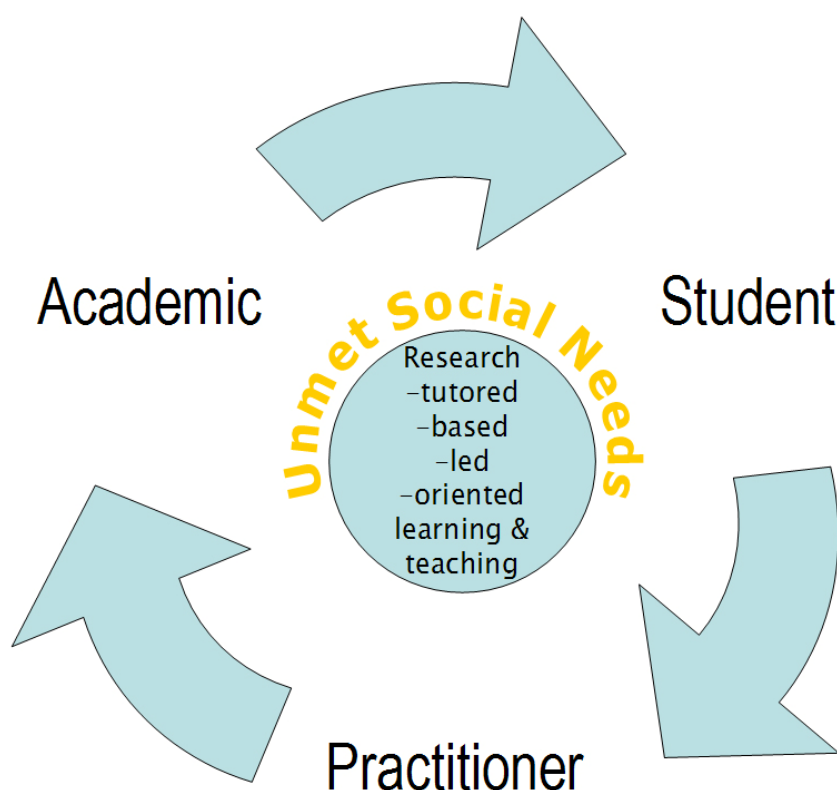


Figure 1: Socially innovative teaching–research–community nexus

In Spring 2009, the teaching–research–community nexus model presented in Figure 1 was applied to MGMT341 International and Comparative Human Resource Management, a required third-year subject in the International Business major taught at a regional Australian university. Whereas the teaching–research–community nexus would logically consider how engaged scholarship can actualise learning in local “community–campus partnerships” (Peterson, 2009, p. 550) this subject required students to extend their critique beyond the local to the international context for application of these principles. For the purposes of this study, MGMT341 used a curriculum designed for students to undertake inquiry-based learning (research-based type).

The subject was co-ordinated, lectured and tutored by the second author. All three items of assessments (the two progressive assessment tasks and the final exam) included questions requiring students to consider, explore and reflect on socially innovative initiatives when considering application of theoretical concepts in the subject. Students were encouraged to use as a working definition of social innovation: “the creation of both wealth and well-being through sound governance, corporate social responsibility, ethical decision-making and environmental sustainability.” In MGMT341, student engagement in the teaching–research–community nexus included involvement in active learning in lectures and tutorials, conducting desk-based research, and then discussing and writing about their ideas, values and opinions on ethically informed corporate behaviour in the management of people in an international context (see Table 1).

Table 1: MGMT341 cohort summary

Number enrolled	138
Age range	Early 20s to late 40s
Number of students by key majors (Some students were completing more than one major; some had not yet declared their major)	International business (61 students) Human Resource Management (37) Management (20) Marketing (9) Finance (6) Psychology (6) Economics (4)
International students	44% of enrolled students
Expected student learning outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify and explain similarities in a range of human resource management policies and practices in a number of countries. 2. Identify and understand major variables in the functioning of industrial relations systems and human resource policies in a number of countries. 3. Explain how different mixes of these variables produce different outcomes. 4. Apply comparative perspectives to debates concerning reform of industrial relations systems and human resource policies. 5. Critically evaluate industrial relations policies at the macro level and human resources policies at the firm level, and the interaction between the two.

The first assessment task in the subject, where students were required to conduct a literature review of journal articles on the topic of expatriation or repatriation, also required students to consider the impact of this international staffing practice on people (not just staff entering the expatriate/repatriate role, but also on those having to work with the expatriate/repatriate in the new location). The nexus between commercial success and community well-being appeared

to be a foreign concept to most students. They struggled to make the link between the research on expatriation/repatriation and the social and ethical ramifications of international business on people. Generally the extant literature was silent on the topic of (local) community impact of Multinational Enterprise (MNE) expansion; students found themselves in uncharted waters requiring a surfacing of their own values on the topic. Overall, their consideration of the impact of human resources (HR) policies on the social needs of employees and their communities was poorly handled.

Answers were rather generalised and assumptions were made that HR policies were socially responsible by definition. Feedback was given to students upon return of the literature reviews regarding how the topic could have been explored in a more critical manner.

The second assessment task required groups of students to generate a consultants' report for a MNE about to expand its operations to a major city in the Asia Pacific region (groups could select a city in Japan, China, India, Indonesia or Singapore). In addition to exploring industrial relations issues in the selected country, groups were asked to consider the potential impact of the MNE's human resource management policies on the community within which the MNE chooses to operate, and to suggest social innovations that could benefit the stakeholders in that community. Students performed much more effectively on this second task. Student reports provided evidence of much clearer recognition that MNE policies could have profound effects on the communities in which they operated. Suggested modifications to HRM policies to enhance well-being through socially responsible approaches and environmental sustainability were much more widespread among the groups, and their justifications for their recommendations were more robustly grounded in both commercial and ethical values. Lecture and tutorial discussions on the social and ethical dimensions of multinational business provided the tools students needed to frame their own research questions into the social, political and environmental systems in the country under investigation for MNE expansion. The following are examples of social innovation initiatives proposed by student groups.

- For MNE expansion into China: hire from a range of levels including graduates, unemployed, younger and older workers, recognising that diversity in selection will have a positive benefit both to the organisation and to the local community. The students recommended a focus on training employees to increase the skill levels in the organisation, thereby also increasing the work options open to those so trained. Management skills, in particular, are in short supply in China and students identified mentoring and coaching as beneficial to the local employees as well as to the company.
- For MNE expansion into Indonesia: invest in training and skills development for employees; adopt environmentally friendly work practices to improve the well-being of employees in the workplace and the well-being of communities in which employees live, and adopt a school in the local area for charity and sponsorship activities.
- For MNE expansion into India: students suggested that MNEs restrict working hours of children, provide compulsory education for employees, safe working conditions and welfare safeguards. It was also suggested that MNEs could invest in technology to provide safe drinking water for communities in which they operate (contaminated water and lack of basic sanitation are still major issues in parts of India). By focusing on reducing pollution emissions, water usage and conserving India's natural resources, MNEs could invest in India's future and raise communities towards their home country standards.

- MNE roles: engaging more directly and openly with unions, taking a social partners approach rather than adopting an adversarial relationship (there is evidence here of students adopting ideas from the Social Agenda in the European Union, covered earlier in the subject, and then applying these principles to managerial practices in Indonesia).
- Several groups expressed the view that MNEs could positively influence the employment relationship by encouraging workplace communities, works councils, and other culturally and socially informed work practices whereby employees could express their “voice” and gain a sense of ownership in the employment relationship.
- The need for MNEs to refuse engaging in bribes and other forms of corruption. Students suggested that MNEs could bring a new chapter to social practices in a given context by “saying no” to corruption – setting the benchmark higher than local companies in ethical decision-making. Eco-labelling and banning the use of child labour also featured in MNE social responsibilities.

The final exam asked students to suggest ways in which international human resource management practices could improve employee well-being in the countries in which MNEs operate. The responses indicated that students understood their research earlier in the semester and saw a clear link between global companies and local social responsibility. Suggestions ranged from MNEs providing basic employee needs for free toilets and drinking water, to setting up health clinics for the well-being of employees. Corporate social responsibility, students asserted, extended towards minimising the environmental impact of an MNE, such as through reducing carbon emissions, managing waste products and recycling, and sourcing only environmentally sustainable materials. Addressing the chronic skills shortage in some countries, by contributing to the educational standards of children and young adults in the community of operation, it was argued, will also allow for a more talented pool of applicants in the future selection process, and adherence to the laws and regulations of the country, should be upheld along with a recognition of and respect for a MNEs moral obligations to the community in which it is a stakeholder. MNEs could fund local schools and apprenticeship colleges, take on board interns, cadets and apprentices from the local community, and provide scholarships to members of the local community. They could also intentionally locate their business in areas of high unemployment to provide work for those in lower socio-economic communities.

Students argued that corporate social responsibility was important to a multinational, not just for reputation and corporate brand image, but also because it be a source of competitive advantage over rivals. They also identified social issues such as exploitative labour conditions in some countries under review and argued that multinationals should take the lead in flexible work arrangements, employee work life/family life balance, and limiting the number of hours of overtime worked. Sweatshops, in particular, were targeted for reform.

The exam responses demonstrated student aspirations that, through MNEs offering assistance to local communities and charities, and through contributing towards critical infrastructure needs, these companies could make a positive difference to the well-being of their employees and their communities. MNEs, through the contributions of socially responsible managers, had the capacity to make informed choices for the benefit of these local societies.

In conclusion, there was evidence of remarkable growth in student articulation of socially innovative initiatives for the workplace and the surrounding communities in which MNEs operate over the course of this session. The MGMT341 case study indicated that student thinking on the impact of commercial activities on local and global communities crystallised

through the teaching–research–community nexus focus embedded in this subject. Consideration of the relevance of international HRM theory to local employees and the communities in which they lived (topics not adequately addressed in the textbook) challenged students to examine critically this gap in the extant research literature. Their own desk-based research on this topic provided a deeper sense of engagement with the topics being investigated in this subject. And their final exam responses indicated clear thinking of specific policies and practices which would benefit both the multinational and the society in which it operated.

The impact of socially innovative assessments based teaching and learning on student learning outcomes and community

Prompted by the assessment attention this year on socially innovative commerce in this international HRM subject, a significant shift occurred in student focus from surface learning of industrial relations information about various countries to critical reflection on the powerful effects of multinational policies – both positive and negative – upon the people in the countries in which they choose to operate. Further, this framework allowed critical discussion of the policies and practices informed by unitarist versions of international human resource management (Hollinshead & Leat, 1995) and a deeper appreciation of pluralist approaches, especially towards the social agenda of the European Union and its influence on work practices of multinationals. Because these insights were generated by student groups themselves through their desk-based research and the mutual sharing of the results, there emerged a student-led sense of ownership of the envisioned solutions in the local communities under review. Students, because of their inquiry-led research into strategies to enhance community well-being, evidenced more engagement in the subject (generally speaking) than in previous years. Student engagement, while difficult to measure in absolute terms, was evidenced by the increased quantity and quality of student contributions during lectures, the quality of informed student discussion during tutorials, and the number of student groups availing themselves of consultation opportunities with the subject coordinator to discuss *their* ideas on ways to improve the community outcomes of international HRM policies and practices. Longitudinal research, to determine whether learning outcomes are more permanently retained and applied, would be the next logical phase of this project.

Watson (2004, p. 451) contends that human resource management research “has tended not to examine the way HR practices relate to patterns of power and inequality in the social world”. Requiring students in assessment tasks to include reflection on the power of multinational enterprise HR policies to affect the social worlds of those in their communities of operation goes some way towards addressing this missing crucial element. Evidence from student assessments is of students moving from a-historical, a-political, a-social approaches in this commerce subject towards more socially and politically informed HRM perspectives. While it remains to be seen how much difference this transformation in learning outcomes can make in the real world, there has certainly been evidence in student reports and presentations of a shift “from knowledge as self-interest and private good...to knowledge as civic responsibility and public work” (Boyte & Farr, 1997 cited in Peterson, 2009, p. 543).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to report the findings of a teaching and learning scholar research project on developing assessments to promote community engagement in the teaching–research nexus of commerce. Based on the application of the proposed teaching–research–

nexus model to the teaching and learning experiences of a third year human resource subject taught at a regional Australian university, this paper examined how research knowledge in business and commerce faculties can generate socially innovative outcomes that meaningfully benefit a wider set of stakeholders in the community. The findings of a significant shift in student focus from surface learning to critical reflection towards more socially and politically informed human resource management perspectives augurs well for the power of the teaching–research–community nexus for positive social change.

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