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# Engaged Scholarship: An Integrated and Participative approach to Student Employability

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## Background

Our world of work is more complex than before, and our communities face dynamic challenges that are unpredictable and unprecedented (Guinan and O'Neill, 2019). Preparing graduates for such uncharted futures in multifaceted workplaces (Knight and Yorke, 2003) requires an approach that is not only innovative and sustainable but we argue, integrated, participative, and inclusive (Smith, Jones, Scott and Stadler, 2017). Our case study shines a light on engaged scholarship, an approach harnessed at Glasgow Caledonian University's School for Business and Society, involving participative research through experiential learning (Lave, and Wenger, 1991). Participatory tri-stakeholder relationships between academic, students and community are powerful ways for all parties to learn from each other whilst collaboratively seeking impactful solutions through social justice and citizenship (Van de Ven, 2018); we organise interdisciplinary student groups that collaboratively tackle some of the most complex community challenges identified by those communities. Subsequently, the assembled Vygotskyian classroom is a life space enabling supported cognitive and non-cognitive skills development (Vygotsky, 1978; Lewin, 1997). We will discuss the approach, exploring how it positively contributes to the employability of students. We define employability as 'a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke, 2006, p. 8). Van de Ven (2007) considers engaged scholarship as a participatory approach to research and we adopt the principles to guide our practice of engaged scholarship involving communities, students, and academics.

## Approach

Our Engaged scholarship approach entails a community organisation, such as a social enterprise, presenting a problem to the university - perhaps a pressing need to generate new income streams, conduct a risk audit, or complete an equalities impact assessment, for example. As a resource for creative problem solving, HEI's are well placed to provide new knowledge that can support community wealth building (Guinan and O'Neill, 2019). The notion that groups of students might, through work-related projects with community organisations, not only contribute to solving a real-world problem, but through process and experience develop themselves and make their own positive impact in the world of work is purposeful and meaningful (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2012).

Our cross-disciplinary professional practice module, sitting across all Departments of our School for Business and Society, is how we 'house' the project, pedagogically designed as an experiential learning experience for students (Lave and Wenger 2003).

Project	No. of Students	Team Type	Masters Programmes/Disciplines
Project 1 2020	14	Discipline based	Risk Management, Accounting
Project 2 2021	40	Interdisciplinary	Marketing, International Fashion Marketing, International Tourism and Events

			Accounting, Finance and Regulation, Risk Management, International Business Management, International Operations and SCM, Social Innovation, Human Rights
Project 3 2021	60	Interdisciplinary	Marketing, International Fashion Marketing, International Tourism and Events Accounting, Finance and Regulation, Risk Management, International Business Management, International Operations and SCM, Social Innovation, Human Rights

The key steps in our approach are as follows:

- Step 1:** Community organisation agreement to pursue a project
- Step 2:** Write short interdisciplinary work ‘briefs’ and agree with community organisation
- Step 3:** Create student groups, complete ethics approval
- Step 4:** Task students to respond to brief, online access to the community organisation
- Step 5:** Students guided through secondary research, website/data analysis
- Step 6:** Response to brief, project report prepared, delivered to community organisation.

The project is 25 hours over 5 weeks. Students keep ‘field notes’ detailing their activities and weekly reflection on professional development based on cognitive and non-cognitive skill set development.

Assessment is on reflective accounts, critically discussing cognitive and non-cognitive skills development. We require students to engage with learning theory and concepts around professionalisation as they reflect on their experience: how they made sense of instructions, how they managed mental and emotional processing, how they organised the group and managed conflicts, diversity, and inclusivity, and finally how they completed the work in a professional capacity (Bandura, 1977; Lewin, 1997).

The report, which is the product passed from university to civil society, is intended to be of genuine use to the community organisation, who can use it as necessary: for example, to lobby local government for policy change (Scottish Government, 2015). According to Van de Ven (2007) and Beaulieu et al (2018), reciprocal arrangements are fundamental to the practice of engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship is a fruitful approach enabling citizenship and creates impact (Beaulieu et al 2018; Van de Ven 2007; Van de Ven, 2018).

## Outcomes

Impact triggers change. Innovative ways to create impact through employability is a relevant discourse; engaged scholarship can enhance employment opportunities while meeting the needs of vulnerable communities in difficult and challenging times. Engaged scholarship, albeit a participatory research process, has a lot to offer the employability agenda, communities and academia. Our Impact is threefold:

1. The most obvious benefit to students is that they have contributed their knowledge and skills to a piece of ‘real world’ action research. Their experience in responding to the brief

and creating the final product is tangible and meaningful, making a valuable addition to their CV; giving students work ready evidence for employers. *"I appreciate the opportunity to be part of the student group. It has already changed my perceptions and made me work towards brushing up and enhancing my cognitive and non-cognitive skills. The big takeaway for me is the reflection in personal and professional engagements."* (Student)

2. By ensuring the stakeholder relationship is mutually beneficial, our engaged scholarship has direct benefit for the community organisation by delivering reports, analysed documents and evidence based documentation that community organisations can use to leverage funds or challenge an institutional rhetoric ; *'It is definitely something I can take to my board and work with' (project 1); 'amazing - thanks so much for verbalising the issues and challenges' (project 2); 'we used the report as evidence of partnership work and we referred to the analysis, research and ideas within funding applications, particularly Scottish Government funding' (Project 2)*
3. Finally, academic publication, including policy papers evidenced with content from these endeavours, case studies and publications about community development; we engage with the social justice, community empowerment and citizenship agenda (Redwood et al 2022).

Our engaged scholarship approach is innovative and process based, an integrated framework constructed using learning frameworks and Vygotskian ideology (Engestrom, 2008; Knowles et al, 2012; Lave and Wenger, 2003; Lewin, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). We support students to enable them to work out how to tackle complex problems; therein is the deep learning and citizenship. Currently, we are applying the same learning and process framework to an undergraduate module of 700 students, we are managing discipline-based student groups through action-based seminars with tasks designed to respond to a case study. The case briefing structures the issues faced by the community organisation and breaks down complex problems into small-simplified weekly tasks, replicated by Tutors in seminar groups. Outputs from the tasks are termed artefacts and included in student portfolios for assessment; we share artefacts with the community organisation as part of our reciprocal arrangement. Always, students are required to reflect on their learning, cognitive and non-cognitive skills development. We continue to create projects that respond to the social justice agenda in our communities.

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