

Fifth International Symposium on Service-Learning

STIAS, 21 November 2013

“Service-Learning across the globe – from local to transnational”

Remarks by Stellenbosch University Rector & Vice-Chancellor Prof H Russel Botman

Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to Stellenbosch for this 5th International Symposium on Service-Learning (ISSL). Allow me to single out our partners from the University of Indianapolis; and the co-sponsors of the Symposium, namely the South African Higher-Education Community Engagement Forum and the Talloires Network.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have a distinct feeling of déjà vu this morning, because back in 2005, it was my privilege to deliver the keynote address at the very first ISSL held here at SU. The organisers tell me that the Symposium has since gone from strength to strength. This year you have 176 participants, from 40 institutions, in 8 countries. That’s great! It says something about higher education in the 21st century.

With service-learning, exciting new possibilities for authentic learning and co-operative learning with communities open up. These are rich learning experiences that occur when different types of knowledge and knowledge systems converge.

There should be reciprocity between university and community so that both parties can actively discover knowledge, both can teach, and both can learn from each other.

This understanding has become entrenched here at Stellenbosch University. We have elevated community interaction to being one of our core functions, equal in stature and just as important as the discovery of knowledge through research; and the dissemination of knowledge through teaching.

And we have found that those academics who embarked on the service-learning journey have been enriched and transformed ... they themselves, as well as their students. This fits well with our science-for-society approach here at Stellenbosch.

Though our HOPE PROJECT we have deployed what we do as a higher-education institution in the service of society. This was inspired by Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of Hope”. He asked a young man one day, “How do you see your future?” And the reply was, “Sir, I have no tomorrow that is any different from today, that is any different from yesterday.”

That shocked him, so he went back and started working on the question of how to have a pedagogy of hope in institutions impacting on society. We have been working with the idea of making a difference to people’s lives. We want to increase our impact on society.

So, we now have service-learning modules in all 10 of the faculties we have, which ranges from Theology to Military Science. Our Division for Community Interaction is responsible for building the capacity of our academics to implement service-learning. And one of our most effective tools is a credit-bearing Short Programme on Service-Learning and Community Engagement.

We have a new Vision 2030 at Stellenbosch University (SU). It is in line with what the country needs to achieve by 2030, as captured in the National Development Plan (NDP).

One of the priorities of our Vision 2030 is to become more innovative, and service-learning certainly helps us to do that. It brings new thinking to how we approach such fundamentally important issues as curriculum, pedagogy and our assessment system

Another goal of our Vision 2030, is to become more inclusive as a university. And I am not just referring to the construct of “race”, which is no doubt important to us in light of our history in South Africa and at this University. But we take it further – we want the highest degree of diversity of ideas and thinking here. Inclusivity is also about culture, religion, sexual orientation, language, socio-economic background and so forth. We want to expose our staff and students to a broad diversity of people and ideas, because it is good for excellence.

Diversity and inclusivity are of tremendous value in a world that is becoming ever more integrated as all kinds of borders fade and multicultural contact increases. Also in this regard service-learning is extremely valuable: It represents a transformative pedagogy of hope that has great potential to add to the diversity and democratisation of curriculum at SU, and help us to contribute to growing a critical citizenry in South Africa.

Lastly, there is another element of our Vision 2030, which is to become ever more future-oriented. The higher-education landscape is changing fast the world over – I am sure you would agree, ladies and gentlemen. On the one hand technology is changing the way that students access and engage with knowledge. And on the other hand, economic pressures are eroding universities’ traditional foundations.

In this context, collaboration becomes vital. The 21st-century university is an engaged institution – an adaptive and flexible organisation that acknowledges the importance of the co-production of knowledge. The 21st-century university is not an island – it forges strong networks and partnerships with others.

The 21st century will be the century of service learning, and it will be so because of the type of people this century requires – people with better values, stronger commitment to others, a commitment beyond self-interest to the welfare of everyone and the environment.

So, thank you for being here, ladies and gentlemen. Sharing our experiences and insights can only be to the benefit of us all ... and ultimately to the advantage of society at large.