

## **A socially responsive university: Teaching, research, community engagement and a community blog-site class project**

### **ABSTRACT**

The lens of decolonisation invites the opportunity to reflect on the current mainstream views regarding the purpose of the public university. A decolonized approach suggests that the key tasks of a university (teaching, research and community engagement) should be socially responsive. This conceptual article draws on a class project to suggest a way in which the three tasks can be combined to respond to a particular social need. Against the foil of a class project - situated in a larger Izindaba Zokudla (conversations about food) community engagement project of the University of Johannesburg – this article argues: 1) instead of conventional teaching methods, teaching should be based on an empowerment education model; 2) instead of a top-down externally initiated model, community engagement should use a participatory multi-stakeholder approach; and 3) instead of conventional research approaches, research should be transformative. The article concludes, firstly that it is possible to integrate the teaching, research and community engagement tasks of a public university productively, and secondly, it should take as point of departure empowerment education, participatory community engagement, and transformative research.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The current discourse of decolonisation suggests rethinking normalised power relationships between the colonised and the coloniser and the lingering effects thereof after political independence (Mbembe, 2015:3, 9-10, 16-17; Fanon, 1967:94-144; Ngũgĩ, 1994:93; Biko, 1987). It also suggests reconsidering assumptions, framing and the normalisation of social ideas in favour of those in power (Narayanasamy, 2009:6; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009; Tacchi & Lennie, 2014; Kincaid & Figueroa, 2009). The implication of domination is that the realities of those on the margins are not foregrounded and they are often framed as the “Other”, the exotic, or as alternative. The process of decolonisation suggests three cyclical processes: critiquing such power relations, reflecting on the implications thereof, and taking action to address unequal power relations or social marginalisation (Membe 2015).

Within the public university sector, decolonisation invites rethinking the assumptions on which teaching is based, the assumptions of research, assumptions about community engagement,

and what it means for a public university to be socially responsive (Maringe, 2017; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2017; Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017; Metz, 2017). Public universities are primarily funded by society through taxes (Lazarus et al., 2008:57-62), and if the prime source of income of a public university is public funding, an argument is made that its tasks should be for the public good (Cuthill et al., 2014:36). Consequently, questions have been raised about whose interests are served by the kinds of information taught at universities, and who benefits from the research undertaken at universities (Cuthill et al., 2014:36; Miller & Sabapathy, 2011). Regarding community engagement projects, questions have been raised about their nature, social sustainability, and the impact of social engagement projects. In other words, decolonisation invites reflection on socially responsible options on which curricula, teaching, research, and community engagement could be based (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Petter, 2010). Within the current focus of reflecting on the task of the public university, it is argued that universities should be innovative (Christensen & Eyring, 2011) and be open in the sense that it should invite non-elites into the processes of producing and sharing knowledge (Miller & Sabapathy, 2011).

The lens of decolonisation thus invites the opportunity to reflect on the current mainstreamed views regarding the purpose of the tasks of the public university – teaching, research and community engagement – and also why these are often performed separately. Against this background, this conceptual article explores a way in which the three tasks can be combined in support of universities being socially responsive, by selecting a specific approach to each of these that are aligned with being socially responsive. Arguments are based on drawing on a class project that forms part of the University of Johannesburg's Izindaba Zokudla (conversations about food) community engagement project with urban farmers in Soweto.

In this article it is argued that the class project is in many ways aligned with social responsiveness, as:

- The Izindaba Zokudla community engagement project (within which the class project is located) questions the applicability of conventional top-down projects and suggests an open, multi-stakeholder approach as an alternative
- The teaching approach used in the class project questions rote learning and instead suggests empowerment education, and
- The research (the present article) suggests transformative research – research that responds to social needs, as it is closely aligned to decolonisation.

It is thus argued that the Izindaba Zokudla model combines teaching, community engagement and research and this is one way for a public university to be socially responsive.

The article further exemplifies how theory and praxis can be combined: this research article seeks not only to reflect on the problematics experienced by urban farmers – specifically the Izindaba Zokudla community – but also to address the communicative problems experienced on a practical level. This is aligned with a university being responsive to society by investigating issues from perhaps a theoretical perspective, but then offering practical guidelines on how to make a concrete contribution to society.

## **1. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: THE IZINDABA ZOKUDLA PROJECT**

Izindaba Zokudla (conversations about food) is an agricultural community engagement project of the University of Johannesburg with farmers in the urban area of Soweto. Soweto is an urban settlement created in the 1930s south-west of Johannesburg when the apartheid government separated the living areas of people on racial lines (Anon., 2018). In the 1940s, more than 20,000 people lived in informal housing in Soweto, and the area grew due to urbanisation and forced removals during the apartheid time (Soweto, n.d.). Soweto became the largest black city in South Africa (Soweto, n.d.). Today the historic roots of this part of the Johannesburg metropolitan area linger and still impact the economic realities of the area. To make ends meet, a relatively large number of people grow their own vegetables and resort to other forms of farming in the urban area. Soweto houses an estimated 4,000 urban farms mostly growing vegetables (e.g. carrots, cabbage, potatoes, herbs) and farming with livestock (mostly goats, chickens, rabbits, sheep, and cattle) (Malan, 2018). The size of the farms ranges from small patches of a few square meters where vegetables are grown to be sold, to large areas of land next to streams (Malan, 2018).

Urban farmers in South Africa have to negotiate multiple difficulties. One of the biggest problems is straddling the logistics of a steady, year-round supply of farm produce to attract large contracts to secure a year-round stable income (Richards & Taylor, 2012:43-49). For the small urban farmer an option is to form partnerships with other farmers or co-operatives (Biénabe & Vermeulen, 2011:498-504). Another challenge is transporting small quantities of produce (e.g. one box of tomatoes and a few bunches of carrots) to a place of offset in a cost-effective way. In other words, logistical and organisational problems are many, and these are often linked to a larger systemic problem related to coordination between farmers and other stakeholders in the food chain (Biénabe & Vermeulen, 2011:498-504; Anderson & McLachlan, 2012:3-9). Furthermore, farmers report having difficulties negotiating 1) different levels of government (national, provincial, local) and different governmental offices, such as of land (access to land, spatial zoning for economic activity and markets), development (development aid and creating marketing opportunities), small business, education and training, and the like (Biénabe & Vermeulen, 2011:498-504; Malan, 2015a:965-969). A related problem that urban farmers face is, to varying degrees, a lack of up-to-date education, training and information about aspects of farming such as soil quality, irrigation, access to water, cost of water, and boreholes. A lack of information, education and training are often linked to relatively low levels of economic productivity and difficulty making full use of economic opportunities that are available (Richards & Taylor, 2012:43-49). This points to the need for multiple stakeholders to be involved to facilitate the development of and changes in the urban agricultural sector (Nkosi et al., 2014:1-5).

On the communication level, three main problems seem to curb such farmers' economic advancement. The first is a lack of access to information, the second is that farmers seem to be marginalised due to social framing, and the third is a lack of marketing opportunities (cf. Malan, 2015a:965-975; Nkosi et al., 2014:1-5). It is thus suggested that a greater social awareness and education about the current food system is needed – the purpose should be educating the public about the functioning and plight of urban farming, the contributions of urban farming to

the economy and fibre of society, as well as an awareness of the advances that urban farming makes to social equity (Allen, 2010:295-308). A related problem that can be addressed with awareness campaigns is the social framing and relatively low social status of urban farming (Perreira, Wynberg & Reis, 2018). In other words, linked to social framing, urban farmers are frustrated by feeling that they are not heard and their need for information is not fulfilled (Richards & Taylor, 2012:43-49). The communication task associated with urban farming is to create social awareness of the above aspects, to offer platforms for urban farmers to be heard and to tell their stories, to facilitate access to information needed for farming, and to promote and seek marketing opportunities.

Historically, the older generation of agricultural development aid projects was based on the assumption that problems with farming are due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the farmer (cf. Jacobson, 2012; Nikkhah, Redzuan & Abu-Samah, 2012:41). For this reason, development aid was based on development facilitators diffusing information to farmers and socialising farmers to adopt externally devised practices that proved effective elsewhere (Tufté & Mefalopulos, 2009:1). This framework is dubbed the “modernisation approach” as it is based on the assumption that the farmer is “lacking” and should “catch up” with the modern world and in this way mimic the modern world (Burger, 2017:5-15).

The second generation of agricultural development projects assumed that 1) farmers may lack agricultural information, but 2) that contextual or systemic problems (e.g. access to land due to economic or political reasons) impact on the economic productivity of farmers (cf. Thomas, 2006:476-477; Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006:845). This generation of agricultural development projects thus does not only centre around information, but also addresses the context in which farming takes place by bringing more stakeholders into the equation (Jacobson, 2012). This generation of agricultural development projects is aligned with political and other forms of decolonisation in the 1960s and 1970s, and is supported by the current resurfacing of the decolonisation discourse suggesting that unequal power hierarchies leading to systemic and systematic exclusion from opportunities need to be identified, criticised and addressed (Mbembe, 2015; Burger, 2017:5-15).

The third generation of agricultural development projects focuses on: 1) education, information and training, 2) multiple stakeholders to address systemic issues, and 3) the active participation of farmers in networks of multiple stakeholders (cf. Obregon & Mosquera, 2005:234-235; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 2006:466-468). This changes the task of development from being centred on information transmission (first generation), to addressing contextual factors to bring about systemic change (second generation), to combining information transmission, addressing contextual factors to bring about systemic change, and encouraging farmers to actively participate in multi-stakeholder conversations to form learning communities that share educational farming information, information about economic opportunities, and form partnerships with other stakeholders (Baum et al., 2006:845; Wicks et al., 2008:18-25). The communicational foci of the second and third generations of agricultural development projects should thus be on 1) making

information available, 2) facilitating discussions, and 3) addressing negative social conceptions about farming, so as to pave the way for the economic advancement of farmers.

### **1.1 Activities of Izindaba Zokudla**

The Izindaba Zokudla (which means “conversations about food” in isiZulu) project was founded in 2013 by two lecturing staff members of the University of Johannesburg (Dr Naudé Malan and Mr Angus Campbell), as part of research and student projects (Malan, 2015a:969; Malan & Campbell, 2014). The Izindaba Zokudla project was thus from the outset conceived as combining research, education, teaching and community engagement. The project has the purpose of enhancing the economic productivity of urban farmers in order to bring about social equity through urban farming (Malan, 2018). By implication, the project thus seeks systemic change in the existing food system with the aim of enabling urban farmers to be economically successful (Malan, 2018).

The mechanism used by Izindaba Zokudla to achieve this goal is to bring multiple stakeholders in the food system together in conversation (Malan, 2015:969). The assumption is that from these conversations, opportunities for urban farmers to increase their economic productivity will arise (Malan, 2015b:54-70). Different to older generations of agricultural development projects, the Izindaba Zokudla project seeks to stimulate the formation of ties amongst multiple stakeholders. Bourdieu (1986) and Gauntlett (2011:2) indicate that different people have different social capital. Gauntlett (2011:2) suggest that social capital can be increased by tying oneself to people with greater and different social capital than one’s own. In this vein, Putnam (1995, 2000) suggests that horizontal ties between people finding themselves in similar sectors or circumstances (e.g. amongst farmers) are often strong bonds that are nurturing, familiar and supportive due to shared values, culture and/or other similarities, but that to result in upward economic mobility these should be supplemented with stakeholders from other sectors (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). In other words, it is suggested that what is called “vertical ties” with like-minded people should be formed (instead of only “horizontal ties”), as vertical ties with people from other sectors are more likely to lead to upward economic mobility. As vertical ties do not have the same strong bond as horizontal ties, vertical ties should be formed between people with the same ideology or who support the same cause (such as change in the food system) (Hawkins & Mauer, 2010:1780). Ties formed in this way may not be as strong due to familiarity and like-ness, but they may be strong enough to bring about change due to shared ideologies and goals (Hawkins & Mauer, 2010:1780). The understanding is that a combination of vertical and horizontal (and even diagonal ties) will not only help if farmers pull together but to form bonds with people of different sectors and people with have different knowledge, experience, skill sets and thus with access to different resources.

In such multi-stakeholder projects, multiple inputs from people with different sets of knowledge, experience and skills are brought together to reflect on developmental problems and then to take action to bring about systemic change (Helmerich & Malets, 2012). The key assumption of the multi-stakeholder approach is to invite multiple stakeholders (individuals or groups) to

offer a plurality of perspectives. If enough diverse input is considered, the assumption is that it is more like that solutions to shared problems will be found (Helmerich & Malets, 2012). A wide range of stakeholders should thus participate in conversations, information sharing, and multiple dialogues, to come to collective decision-making and implementation of solutions. In a developmental context, this view is associated with the participatory approach – as it invites participation of all the stakeholders regardless of social status (Fransen, 201:165–190). Even though some form of representation of each level of the whole system (all governmental levels, all sectors, all community groupings, etc.) is desired, this might not be feasible in all cases (Fransen, 201:165-190). The particular circumstances and problems of each project determine the nature and level of participation. Nevertheless, the principle remains, the wider the participation and the more diverse the stakeholders, the bigger the chances of support for and success of the project.

In contrast to a close organisational multi-stakeholder setting, development projects (such as the Izindaba Zokudla project) often do not have fixed set of stakeholders, representative of each section of the organisation. The Izindaba Zokudla uses an open, multi-stakeholder model as it is not a closed structure, but a conversation-based facilitating structure (Malan, 2015b:65-69). In other words, the stakeholders come and go – they join in on conversations at will (Malan, 2015a:969-171). This means that stakeholders participate if and when they want to, and can withdraw at any point with the open invitation to join again at a later stage when they are able to, and should they wish to.

The Izindaba Zokudla project offers many activities stakeholders can participate in to converse and form ties. The standing anchor activity is the monthly Farmers Lab, organised by the project convener, Dr Naudé Malan, in collaboration with the farmer organising committee. It is a full-day event that offers a combination of lectures, small group conversations, and other opportunities for dialogue. The day starts off with community feedback and announcements whereby the around 200 attendees are given the opportunity to share information and opportunities with one another in a lecture hall on the Soweto campus of the University of Johannesburg. These range from announcements of land that has become available, where seeds can be obtained at a feasible price, sponsored training courses, developments with negotiations with one of the governmental levels, small business opportunities, abattoir and cold storage facilities, and the like. Thereafter, a series of speakers offer information and opportunities. These range from lectures on enhancing yields, irrigation, waste management, market opportunities, natural pesticides, managing seed banks, to speakers marketing their farming support products such as water storage systems, using drones for GPS mapping, and the like. Attendees of the Farmers Lab are primarily farmers but all other stakeholders attend from time to time. The idea behind the Farmers Lab is that information is shared and that multiple conversations take place. However, as it is an open, multi-stakeholder engagement project, not everybody involved in the project attends each time. Aside from ample opportunities for dialogue during the Farmers Lab day, one of the key functions is to encourage farmers to form partnerships amongst themselves, and for farmers and other stakeholders to form partnerships to work towards economic mobility.

This means that the focus of the Izindaba Zokudla project is to create opportunities for farmers and it is up to the farmer is to decide which opportunities to take up. In contrast to earlier generations of agricultural development projects, where a vertical line of authority between the development facilitator and the farmer was created, this approach shifts the responsibility of participation in agricultural development projects to the urban farmer (Malan, 2015b:65-69; Malan, 2015a:969-171; Malan, 2018). The opportunities made available to farmers range considerably: from information, to training, to products at a reduced price, forming learning circles, to forming partnerships that stimulate economic productivity.

### **1.2 Communication of the izindaba zokudla project**

The Izindaba Zokudla project uses a range of communicative options, most notably in-person communication and digital communication.

In terms of in-person communication, large-group, smaller group, and individual conversations are held. Large-group communication supplemented by PowerPoint slides in a lecture-hall is the anchor of the Farmers Lab days. The speakers' presentations take the form of lectures whereby information is transmitted to the audience whilst question time allows audience members to ask questions or raise issues. In the break time after sessions, stakeholders gather in smaller groups or one-on-one communication to discuss shared issues. In other words, a combination of large group, small group, and interpersonal one-on-one communication is used in the Farmers Lab. During sponsored training courses – typically attended by a handful of farmers – similar modes of communication are used. From a development communication perspective, the combination of these different modes of in-person communication are commended as it invites stronger engagement, interpretation, questioning and “working through” information, as opposed to lectures in the format of transmission of information (Jacobson 2012). Earlier generations of agricultural development projects assumed that consuming information, instead of participating in the creation of information, will result in the adoption of more effective farming practices (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). This kind of thinking stems from the diffusion of innovation paradigm that dominated development communication thinking in the middle of the previous century (Servaes & Malikhao, 2005). The fact that the Farmers Lab offers information and invites discussion is thus more closely aligned with the newer generations of agricultural development projects. In many cases, farmers form partnerships with other stakeholders through such discussions. This aligns the Izindaba Zokudla project to a great extent with the newer generations of agricultural development projects that assume active participation from all stakeholders.

The Izindaba Zokudla project also uses digital internet-based communication, most notably a Facebook site, a WhatsApp group, an email list, and a smart mobile phone application (called Khula!). The vast majority of farmers have smart mobile phones to access the internet. A problem reported by farmers is that data bundles are expensive, with the implication that not all farmers are constantly linked to the internet. This points to the digital divide that excludes lower income groups from full participation in much internet-based communication and in

turn may curb full use of economic opportunities (Tacchi & Lennie, 2014). However, when farmers attend the Farmers Lab day once a month they have access to the university's wi-fi system to download information onto phones, access the Facebook site, and the internet in general. The result is that the WhatsApp group is the most used internet-based platform as it is relatively inexpensive in comparison to other internet-based communication and information platforms. The WhatsApp group consists of farmers and other stakeholders and the organising committee ensures that it is strictly a "business only" platform. On the platform, the occasional "good morning, how are you?" posts are immediately contested. The result is that the platform is used to share business opportunities, such as where to buy the best seeds at the least expensive price, where to obtain certified organic manure, to announce good places to market and sell products, and the like. In other words, the WhatsApp group is a community of sharing business and advancing opportunities, instead of an emotional support group or a mechanism to keep in touch, as many WhatsApp groups tend to be. As the Izindaba Zokudla WhatsApp group is getting quite large, an option currently under discussion is to split the WhatsApp group into smaller subgroups per sector, such as stock farming and vegetable farming. In addition to WhatsApp, Facebook serves as form of digital diary of the history of the Izindaba Zokudla group's activities. After each Farmers Lab, a summary of the events and the contact details of speakers are posted, along with a few photographs taken on the day. New opportunities are announced on Facebook, and these are replicated on the WhatsApp group. The Izindaba Zokudla group uses Facebook to post longer pieces, more visual material (photos of events and links to YouTube videos), as well as information and links to a range of stakeholders. Similarly, the email list is used to communicate to farmers who have access to email and other stakeholders to announce the latest events and opportunities. Group emails are typically sent out once or twice a month inviting stakeholders to the Farmers Lab or occasionally to other meetings. Of these three modes of communication, WhatsApp is the most active amongst farmers, with a large number of posts each day, whilst a few new posts a month appear on the Facebook site. Not many farmers access their emails regularly, but most of the other stakeholders do. As many small farmers report difficulty in accessing markets, a new partnership between farmers and a private organisation has been formed to develop a marketing mobile phone application (Khula!) whereby farmers can advertise their produce to consumers. This application has recently been launched and it is too early to gauge its success. In addition to these internet-based activities, Dr Naudé Malan, the Izindaba Zokudla convener, prolifically uses many social media platforms to post new information about the activities of the project (e.g. TED talks, YouTube videos, his own blog-site, Facebook, etc.).

In other words, the digital platforms currently used by Izindaba Zokudla provide the latest information and opportunities available to farmers and in the process provide a digital footprint of the activities of the project. The platform focuses on the latest events. This means that it neither offers a systematic categorisation of activities and events, nor a categorised digital storage of historic information. This is problematic as the current form of Izindaba Zokudla is an open multi-stakeholder model and that poses a number of problem such as the possible



loss of information as stakeholders 'come and go', as well as not having a systematic plotting of the network of stakeholders, and subsequently not having storytelling opportunities where farmers can share their life stories. These were reported as problems in a pilot research undertaken by interviewing 14 farmers who volunteered for the project during the second half of 2017. During the pilot study, participants were asked what they propose as a solution, and respondents suggested capturing information in one site on the internet. In addition, participants in the pilot study suggested they would like to have the opportunity to share their life stories with the world on the internet. They also suggested becoming part of a network of information about urban farming by having a profile for their farming business on the internet.

Within development communication theory, the needs expressed during the pilot study can be described by participatory communication framework of development communication and social change. This framework is largely based on the Freirean framework of dialogue and community participation, and by the UNESCO framework of access participation and self-management of media systems (Servaes & Malikhao, 2005:97-87; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009:10-11). The Freirean framework suggests that groups that find themselves on the fringes of society (due to poverty, the history of a country, low economic productivity, etc.) should seek to normalise their public image as legitimate in the public sphere, and not as the "Other" that occupies the margins of society (Freire, 2003:354; Freire, 1992b:89; Servaes & Malikhao, 2005:96). In other words, as the media and the internet play a considerable part in the public sphere, stakeholders in the Izindaba Zokudla project can use the interactive opportunities of Web 2.0 to be producers of mass mediated information about themselves and in this way reposition their public image away from the margins towards the centre (Andrejevic, 2015; Couldry, 2015; Jenkins, 2013). Similarly, the UNESCO framework of access, participation and the self-management of media systems suggests the democratisation of the media and internet landscape in order to facilitate representation of all groups in society in the public sphere so that issues important to them (such as systemic change in the food system and equal economic opportunities for all groups in society) can be discussed openly, robustly and without prejudice (UNESCO, 1978:3-6; Servaes & Malikhao 2005: 96). The UNESCO framework thus suggests large-scale community participation in media and internet platforms in what is called self-expression (Servaes & Malikhao, 2005:96). The interactive functionality of the internet (Web 2.0 and beyond) offers many opportunities not only to be represented in positive ways, but also for ordinary people to present their case and to present themselves in public spheres (Barker, 2012:176–179). Thumim (2012:136-156) calls this "self-representation" - as opposed to being represented in the media by someone else. Storytelling, or sharing one's life story, is an activity through which self-presentation occurs increasingly on the internet. In development communication and social change theory, it is argued that the validation through self-expression and self-presentation is often linked to redressing social marginalisation (cf. Tufte, 2013:32; Nikkhah, Redzuan & Abu-Samah, 2012:41).

Many urban farmers are not in a position to take up opportunities for self-expression and impacting the public sphere (mediated or online) due to not having access – in other words, there seems to be a digital divide (cf. Tacchi & Lennie, 2014). Many of the farmers

participating in this project reported problems of physical access to the internet (e.g. laptops, data bundles) and other forms of access (such as fluency in the languages that dominate the internet and media in South Africa). It is against this background of problems with access that a class project took shape to work with the Izindaba Zokudla community to help address some of their self-presentation needs on the internet.

## **2. *TEACHING: THE COMMUNITY BLOG-SITE CLASS PROJECT***

The findings of the pilot study, namely a self-reported need to share life stories on the internet, the need to capture information shared at the Farmers Lab in an easy findable location, and the desire for a profile for farming business, have been tested on two occasions during the Farmers Lab day. Both suggestions were met with overwhelming support.

Against this background, one of the Honours courses offered in a department in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg combines theory and praxis to co-create a community blog-site with the farmers of Izindaba Zokudla. A total of 31 students enrolled for the course in Contemporary Issues in Communication, studied the theoretical assumptions mentioned in this article, and thereafter interviewed farmers during the August 2018 Farmers Lab day. Students sought permission for the interviews with consent forms, conducted interviews, and transcribed their interviews. They reworked the interviews into two stories – a technical profile of the farming practices, and a life story of the farmer. Some students offered to create the blog-site template, and to upload and tag the stories of the farmers, whilst other students made lists of the non-farming stakeholders of the project. Before uploading the profiles on the blog site, students shared the profiles with their interviewees to seek approval. The intention is that the following years' Honours students would replicate the project, capturing more farmers' profiles for the blog-site should the farmers wish to continue with the project. Currently, interested farmers are coming forth to be trained to write and upload more profiles themselves.

There are many reasons why it was decided to use the platform of a community blog-site. On a technical level, blog-sites are relatively user friendly, are free up to a certain size, and to enlarge the free space multiple blogs can be linked to one blog-site without fragmenting user experience, and ample opportunities exist for linking to other internet pages and the tagging of themes. Another consideration is that in the absence of a home page for the project that would be costly, blog sites can be designed to fulfill the needs expressed by farmers. The last decade saw a proliferation of internet-based life-stories documenting the lived and everyday emotional experiences, events and interactions of ordinary people, which seems to be a documentation of the lives of authors through weblogging or blogging (Casalegno, 2010:119). In contrast with the private act of expressing and reflecting on one's life, emotions, life events and relationships through paper-based diary writing, internet-based life stories have the additional elements of digitality, being public and hoping for some form of response as validation and engagement from readers (Sorapure, 2010:501-514). Internet-based research negated the practice of diary-style blogging as exhibitionist or voyeuristic (cf. Nardi et al., 2004:43-44), as many people read it in search of a "more authentic encounter" (as opposed to saturation with scripted representations)

and spurred by a “desire for excitement, to see others face a ‘moment of reckoning’” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004: 5). With the interactive capabilities of the internet, blogging evolved to be associated with signaling a shared experience with the potential to create a virtual community where like-minded people interact (Sorapure, 2010:499; Lopez, 2009:742).

The pedagogical reason why the course was given a practical component (to work with the Izindaba Zokudla farmers to create a community blog-site) is that the course is aligned with empowerment education. In contrast to the instructional rote-learning model of education (also referred to as the banking model of teaching), adult educationist Paulo Freire draws on Franz Fanon and suggests empowerment education (Freire, 2003a:66; 2003b:354-357). With its roots in decolonisation, empowerment education suggests that education should empower learners to realise problems in society, the implications thereof, and then use education to address societal problems (Motta, 2013:81). Empowerment education is aligned with the processes suggested by decolonisation, by 1) identifying power inequalities, 2) reflecting on the consequences of such inequalities, and 3) addressing such inequalities (Freire, 2003b:354-357; Mbembe, 2015). Empowerment education is thus critical and anchored in real life contexts as opposed to studying the canon or international curricula or theory for the sake of theory (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003:19-21). Students should be encouraged to question the relevance of theory – this means the assumption that international theories can be universally applied even if produced elsewhere based on conditions of another locale (Lombardi, 2007:3-4). In other words, empowerment education suggests testing the applicability of foreign theory to explain, reflect on, or address local problems. Local theory formation should thus be encouraged, and theory for the sake of theory (or the canon) should be avoided. Instead of relying only on foreign theory, studying at a university should take the real-life problems as a starting point and form new theories that explain phenomena and address real-life problems experienced in this locale (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003:19-21). This means getting students out of the classroom to investigate real-life problems armed with textbook knowledge that might (or might not) help them to explore and address real-life problems. The crux is that university courses should critically reflect on the process, and genuinely seek to address real-life problems.

### **3. RESEARCH: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE COMMUNITY BLOG-SITE CLASS PROJECT**

So far in this article it has been illustrated that the Izindaba Zokudla project follows an open multi-stakeholder engagement approach to address a food system that supports social inequality. It is in contrast with conventional approaches to universities' community engagement that tend to be top-down by diffusing information to a recipient community or to provide a service to a community (Jonker, 2016; Snyman, 2014). Such an authoritative approach is not necessarily negated, but decolonisation suggests thinking about other options too – other options that would be more inclusive of the recipient community and that stand a better chance to bring about sustained social change. It has been argued that a multi-stakeholder approach ties people of different strata and sectors into a project, and farmers are actively engaged in the project to better their economic position through farming and through addressing the food system's problems. It is thus suggested

in this article that a multi-stakeholder approach should be considered for universities' community engagement projects that seek both development and systemic change.

In terms of teaching, it has been argued that empowerment education with its roots firmly in decolonisation is an option to consider by a socially responsive university. It has been illustrated that empowerment education is rooted in decolonisation for various reasons, but for combining theory and practice, for allowing students to address a real life problem with the knowledge that they have gained in class, and for reflecting critically on the methodology and outcome. In other words, empowerment education is in contrast with the information diffusion and memorisation model (also called the banking model of teaching). The article does not contest the value of memorisation and passing on of information in certain circumstances, but it explores empowerment education as another option aligned with the processes of decolonisation of the mind that may open up possibilities for addressing social problems. The community blog-site is a practical outflow of the theory taught in the course, and in this way the course tends to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. The course deals with the North–South flow of information, the possibility of creating contra-flows of information via the self-expressive and storytelling options available on Web 2.0, and the subsequent validation through self-expression and storytelling for the individual and by mainstreaming the real-life stories of people often relegated to the margins. The applied component of the course involved creating with the community (based on the community's prior request for this project) a community blog-site. This is aligned with empowerment education in the sense that students do not only study textbook examples that illustrate theories discussed in class. Instead the class project offers them the opportunity to reflect on the theory taught in the course and critique it from a real-life, global Southern perspective. This is an attempt towards local theory formation that seeks to be locally embedded while having global relevance. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to contribute, albeit in a small way, to address negative social perceptions and the lives of the farmers that they have worked with. In this way, both the greater Izindaba Zokudla project and the community blogging subproject are not performed “on” or “for” the community, but emerge from interactions “with” the community.

The farming community of Izindaba Zokudla benefits from the community blog-site in several ways. Firstly, on the level of storytelling it can be argued that they have gained the opportunity to tell their life stories publicly and that in itself is validating. It is also another form of validation as students are interested in their lives, and, around the world, anybody with access to the internet can potentially read their life stories. Since the blog-site is linked to similar urban farmer blogs in the global South, a greater South–South awareness is possible. There may not be a large counter-flow of information from the global South to the global North, but at minimum, it has the potential to work in that direction. High cost of access to the internet reinforces the digital divide globally whereby many farmers are excluded from regular access to the blog-site, but they can access the blog-site when on campus for the monthly Farmers' Labs. The issue of access was considered, but it was decided that the personal validation through storytelling, in combination with the potential for other readers and the systemic networking opportunities, plus the potential marketing opportunities arising from this project, would justify the creation of the website.

In terms of research, this article suggests that a socially responsive university would support research that reflects on the assumptions of research. Mainstream tenets tend to favour positivist knowledge production in the academy, confirming in the process hierarchical processes of knowledge transfer (Anderson & McLachlan, 2015:1). This means that it tends to distance the researcher from the research phenomenon or subjects in order to remain objective, and that the knowledge generated by the researcher tends to be given considerable social value over other forms of knowledge. In an attempt to generate new knowledge to address real-life local problems, and in line with the transformative ethos of the Izindaba Zokudla project, this article is aligned with transformative research. Transformative research is rooted in knowledge mobilisation processes suggesting close collaboration between researcher and communities as part of a broader agenda for progressive social change (Anderson & McLachlan, 2015:1). Close collaboration between researchers and social groupings is aimed at constructing knowledge that answers current pressing questions in a particular locality – without neglecting the international context (Nongxa, 2010). In other words, transformative research suggests a shift from seeing the academy as “expert producer of knowledge” to “collaborative knowledge” production, doing research “with” the community and not “on” the community or “for” the community (Cuthill & Brown, 2010:129; see also Smith, 2002). In this way new knowledges are co-constructed between the researcher and the researched, and such locally created knowledge is aimed at addressing local problems (Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015). This form of critical engagement facilitates the generation of new knowledge that is not possible with conventional mainstream research methodologies (Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015). The whole of the Izindaba Zokudla project is a social transformation project, but describing the project and reflecting on it via research outputs, constitute transformative research as it reflects critically on the task of a university, and the assumptions of teaching, community engagement and research.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, decolonisation provides a lens through which the notion of a socially responsive university can be viewed. In line with decolonisation, this article suggests criticising and reflecting on conventional approaches to community engagement, teaching and research. It also suggests combining teaching, research and community engagement in a very specific way to respond to real social needs: 1) instead of conventional teaching methods, teaching should be based on an empowerment education model; 2) instead of a top-down externally initiated model, community engagement should use a participatory multi-stakeholder approach; and 3) instead of conventional research approaches, research should be transformative.

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