‘[WE] HAVE TO BE ... INTERPRETERS TO NEGOTIATE’:[1] SERVICE LEARNING AND BOUNDARY WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on qualitative case study research of two service learning courses, this article uses the framework of activity theory to present service learning as an activity system and a form of ‘boundary work’ in higher education. To view service learning as an activity system, it is necessary to locate the analysis in the ‘boundary zone’ at the nexus of the university and community, and to explore the roles of various actors in the system. In particular, the author argues that the role of the service learning educator needs to be explored and made visible. Using activity theory, the experiences of two educators’ playing the role of ‘boundary worker’ are explored. What activity theory makes clear is that this role is intimately tied up with issues of identity, authority and knowledge. Going forward it would be useful to explore activity theory as a framework in the service learning curriculum and the professional development of educators.

Keywords: service learning, social practice, activity theory, boundary work, identity, boundary workers

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INTRODUCTION

> Boundary work needs to be facilitated and managed and to do this specific knowledge and skills are required ... engagement as a core value will be evident in the extent to which universities do actually develop the skills, create the organisational forms and manage tensions that will inevitably arise when different social worlds interact (Gibbons 2005, 11).

Much of the service learning literature focuses on either the university or the community side of the university-community partnership. I have argued previously (McMillan 2008) that it is necessary to explore the nature of the 'boundary zone' itself – or as Gibbons (2005, 7) calls it, the 'transaction space'. The interactions that occur here are multiple and complex, rendering the zone an often contested space. I have explored both the interactions between students and community members as well as the roles of educators as they negotiate the relationships and activities that constitute service learning (McMillan 2008, 2009). In this article I wish to focus specifically on the educator's role, as I believe this role is more often assumed than examined and understood: many aspects of the educator's role are taken for granted without exploring the ways in which different educational practices and contexts can position them, either offering or taking away agency. The article draws on work done previously (McMillan 2011) but develops a more nuanced account of the struggles of educators by drawing directly on activity theory in the analysis.

To understand the complexity of the educator's role in service learning, robust conceptual and analytical tools are needed. Thus, I draw on activity theory to develop a notion of 'service learning as boundary work', in this case in particular, for educators. Drawing from research on two service learning courses (McMillan 2008), I explore the work and role of the educator in each.[2] Through this analysis it will become clear that each educator is positioned quite differently in relation to his/her agency in, and across, the boundary zone for a range of complex reasons.

PART 1: SERVICE LEARNING AS SOCIAL PRACTICE WITHIN AN ACTIVITY SYSTEM

Much of the service learning work in South Africa has taken its inspiration from the work in the United States (US). As a movement, service learning has a long history in the US as part of the attempts by many higher education institutions to be more 'civically engaged' in their surrounding communities as well as to develop new and more socially responsive and accountable models of teaching and research (Stanton, Giles and Cruz 1999). Boyer (1996, 16) speaks of 'a new paradigm of scholarship' where the university celebrates teaching and research while also taking pride in becoming a more vigorous partner in searching for solutions to pressing social problems.

There are numerous definitions of service learning that are well documented. Waterman (1997, 2) lists the key features of the practice:

- Students learn and develop through participating in organised service experiences that meet community needs.
- Experiences are integrated into the students’ academic curriculum and provide opportunities for students to think critically about the meaning and the learning from that experience.
- Opportunities are provided for students to use acquired skills (from the university) in real life contexts.

However, understanding this form of educational practice involves understanding a range of complex and challenging relationships, processes and interactions that go beyond the ‘traditional’ formal curriculum in higher education (Cruz and Giles 2000; Stanton, Cruz and Giles 1999). Focusing research on the university-community interface or ‘transaction space’ as a unit of analysis can take on some of these challenges; however, it has received scant attention in the higher education literature until more recently. Winberg (2006) talks about the usefulness of understanding transaction spaces in the South African higher education context. She argues that they are key to understanding the ‘articulations between higher education and its contexts in the South African situation’ and ‘emergent transaction spaces’ Winberg (2006, 165) are important sites for negotiation between participants from a range of academic and non-academic contexts. Drawing on the work of Notwotny et al. (2001), Winberg (2006, 164) makes the argument that ‘“transaction spaces” provide the means and processes by which macro, meso and micro concerns can “speak” to higher education – as well as the means by which educators can “talk back” to other contexts’.

While Winberg’s arguments focus mostly on research, she also suggests that it is useful to think about these issues in teaching and learning processes.

Situated learning and communities of practice

Given my understanding, following Vygotsky (1978), that learning happens first in the social and then in the individual plane, that is, it is an inherently social practice, I have been drawn to theories that focus on learning as social practice in order to understand service learning.[3] In drawing on the concept of ‘social practice’, I use it very broadly to emphasise the ‘relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, 50). From a situated learning perspective, therefore, social practice is understood as a lens that puts an emphasis on the ‘inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and action of persons-in-activity’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, 50–51).

Accordingly, learning, which in other frameworks might be viewed as individual, mental and non-social, is viewed as situated, collective and historically specific. It is this 'doing in a historical and social context' that gives structure and meaning to what people do. In understanding how this engagement takes place, the authors introduce the concept of a 'community of practice'[4] to refer to the sustained engagement with others in practices over time. Following this, academic disciplines, professional discipline-related bodies on the one hand, and community organisations and activities/practices, on the other, could all be viewed as communities of practice with their particular practices and ways of doing things.[5]

While situated learning – and a community of practice lens in particular – has a lot to offer and has been drawn on in theorising service learning (Castle and Osman 2003; McMillan and Shay 2004; Wolfson and Willinsky 1998), it also has limitations as a robust and critical analytical framework (Daniels 2001; Hay 1993; Hodges 1998; Lemke 1997). Some argue that a situated learning lens does not directly and explicitly develop a theory of power and power relations (Cooper 2005; Hodges 1998; Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2003) and there are no 'analytical tools' in this approach to facilitate the development of a more comprehensive theory of social practice and in particular, pedagogy.

Activity theory: Delineating the 'unit of analysis'

To address these critiques I return to the roots of situated learning and to the work of a number of post-Vygotskians. The particular strand that I have drawn on is activity theory, evident in the work of Kozulin (1998) and Engeström and Miettinen (1999) in particular, where the unit of analysis is the *activity system*. Billett (2002, 85) summarises the key differences between communities of practice and activity theory in ways that enabled me to see why the move from communities of practice to activity theory was important for my purposes:

> [Activity theory (AT)] holds that human actions are the product of social practices that are historically and culturally constituted. Some AT perspectives focus on historical and cultural contributions to human activity, including the sociogenesis of knowledge .... whereas others focus on how situational factors shape human actions ... *[T]he latter, in particular, assists in delineating what comprises a social practice and identifying the factors that constitute that practice* (emphasis added).

My use of activity theory has been as in the latter, that is, a focus on how situational factors shape human actions; the rest of this section is focused on developing this understanding further.

Engeström (1996) argues for 'three generations' of activity theory. In first generation activity theory, there are three essential elements in any activity system, namely: subject/s, object/s and tools. The s*ubjects* are individuals or subgroups engaged in an activity. The *object* is the 'raw material' on which the subject brings to bear various tools, for example, the ‘object of study’. It is important to understand that the object is more than just raw stimuli: it is a ‘culturally formed object with a history, however short or long’ (Russell 2002, 69). In any activity system, the *motive* is linked to the ‘object’ as it shapes the *outcome* of the activity’s overall. *Tools*, both material and/or conceptual (Cole 1996), are understood as things that mediate subjects’ action upon objects, that is, they mediate or facilitate subjects doing things. Examples could include a concept, a computer, or a text. It can be represented as shown in Figure 1.

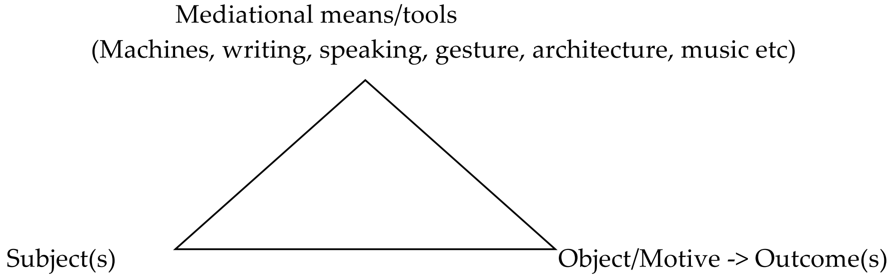
Mediational means/tools
(Machines, writing, speaking, gesture, architecture, music etc)
Subject(s)
Object/Motive -> Outcome(s)

Figure 1: First generation activity theory

For the second generation, Engeström expands the framework to examine systems of activity at the macro level. The importance of this shift is that it foregrounds interrelations between the individual subject and the community of which he/she is a member. The *community* is the broader or larger group interacting in the activity and of which the subject/s is/are a part. The *division of labour* refers to the fact that in any activity there are always power relations and different roles are evident, often causing contradictions in the system. The *rules* operating in any activity are broadly understood as both formal and explicit rules governing behaviour as well as those that are 'unwritten and tacit', often referred to as norms, routines, habits, values and conventions (Engeström 1993; Russell 2002) as captured in Figure 2.

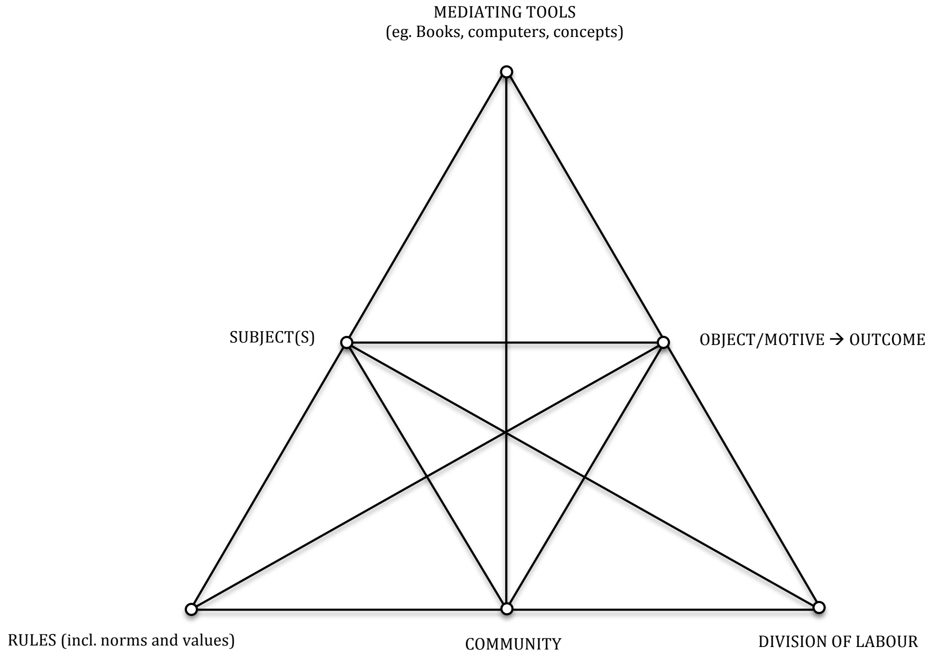
MEDIATING TOOLS
(eg. Books, computers, concepts)
SUBJECT(S)
OBJECT/MOTIVE → OUTCOME
RULES (incl. norms and values)
COMMUNITY
DIVISION OF LABOUR

Figure 2: Second generation activity theory

Third generation activity theory is aimed at providing tools and concepts that can enable individuals to understand and explore multiple viewpoints, value systems and 'networks of *interacting* activity systems' (Daniels 2001, 91; emphasis added) where contradictions highlighted by contested activity system objects emerge. This was useful for my research and is represented in Figure 3.

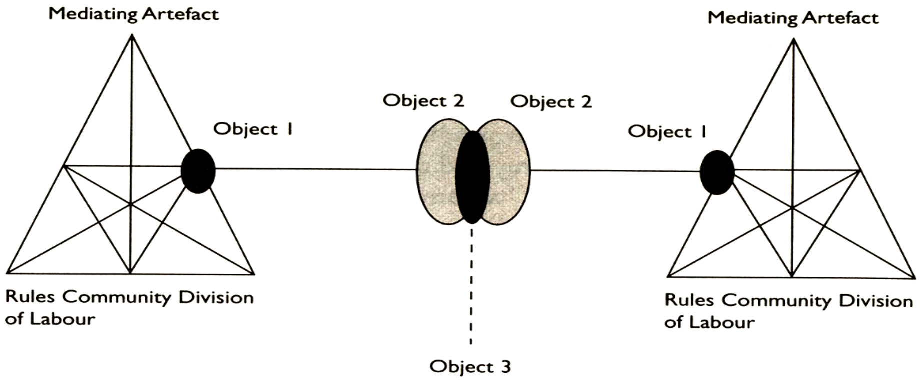

Figure 3: Third generation activity theory (taken from Russell 2002)

Following Barab et al. (2002, 78), I understand the 'minimal meaningful unit of analysis/context' as the whole activity system that includes 'the *actor* (participants) or *actors* (subgroups) *whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis* and the acted on (object) as well as the dynamic relations among both' (emphasis added). In other words, while there are a number of actors in any system, the researcher selects an actor or a group of actors whose activities become the focus of the analysis. In my case, I examined educators' accounts of these experiences as a way to understand the challenges of intersecting activity systems in the university–community boundary zone.

Engeström (1999) argues that not only do researchers need to include the structure of the social world in their analysis but the also need to take into account that social practice is inherently contradictory and conflictual. Thus, within one activity system there are inherent contradictions between the components of a system; it is the resolution of such tensions that leads to change and therefore development. An example could be the tension between subjects – in this case, educators – and rules, for example, new ways of teaching that might be developed in a service learning course. This raises important questions for those in service learning: can educators adapt to this and to the new norms and values implied by this new form of pedagogy?

What does this mean for the role and authority of the educator? How does he/she negotiate this complex practice?

PART 2: SERVICE LEARNING AS ‘BOUNDARY WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION’

Over the years a number of authors have explored service learning as a form of ‘border pedagogy’ (Hayes and Cuban 1997; Keith 1998; Skilton-Sylvester and Erwin 2000; Taylor 2002), drawing largely on work in critical pedagogy and critical postmodernism (Anzaldua 1987; Giroux 1992). They argue that new lenses need to be developed in order to understand aspects of the service learning experience. In particular, they argue that the metaphors of ‘borders’, ‘border-crossing’ and ‘borderland’ are useful and important as a ‘compelling starting point for describing and rethinking the nature of service-learning’ (Hayes and Cuban 1997, 74).

Boundary zones and roles of brokers

Building on this, a ‘boundary work’ lens can further elaborate on these concepts and provide a useful contribution both to debates on service learning as well as on ways to improve the research done on it. Drawing on the work of Wenger (1998) and Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2003), two concepts are significant here, namely: boundary zones, and brokering, or boundary work.

‘Boundary zone’ refers to the intersection zone/activity system located between two activity systems, namely, a new activity system (third generation activity theory) where the possibility of contradiction amongst elements of the activity system increases. Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2003) argue that while such spaces are generally places of challenge, contestation and playing out of power relations, they can also be potential sites for new learning opportunities and new knowledge. And because such zones are the places where each community of practice reflects its own discourse, structure, norms and roles, elements from both systems are always present.

Secondly, the role of ‘brokering’ is important in boundary work. In developing this frame I was interested in focusing on the educators as actors who facilitate the activities across the boundary zone. These are the ‘brokers’ (Wenger 1998) or ‘boundary workers’: agents who assist participants to make new connections across activity systems; to enable co-ordination; and, if experienced, to open new possibilities for meaning and therefore learning (Wenger 1998). It involves ‘processes of translation, co-ordination and alignment between perspectives’ (Wenger 1998, 109). In order to influence the development of a practice, to mobilise attention and to address conflicting interests requires enough legitimation on both sides of the boundary. In this way, potential contradictions exist between, for example, community, rules and division of labour of the boundary workers. I look at this in Part 3 of the article.

Identities at the boundary: Challenges of boundary workers

> Identities – if they are alive, if they are being lived – are unfinished and in process ... They do not come into being, take hold in lives, or remain vibrant without considerable work in and for the person. *They happen in social practice* (Holland et al. 1998, vii; emphasis added).

In understanding roles and identity in social practice contexts, the work of Holland et al. (1998; Holland and Lave 2001) in the field of 'ethnographies of personhood is illuminating'. Through their research, these researchers show/describe how 'specific, often socially powerful, cultural discourses and practices both position people and provide them with the resources to respond to the problematic situations in which they find themselves' (Holland et al. 1998, 32).

Identity is therefore seen as developing at the interface between 'social and embodied sources of the self – in "self-in-practice"' (Holland et al. 1998, 32). From an activity theory perspective (Roth et al. 2004, 68), identity is not something that can be taken for granted as an *a priori* constituent of activity; it is something that is made and remade as activity is enacted:

> To understand identity, we must consider the tools, object, community, rules and division of labour associated with the primary activity system. We also must consider other activity systems that the individual is and has been involved in and take into account those activity systems (distributed over space and time) in which others from the primary activity system are involved.

In other words, the ways in which boundary workers act out their identities and take on specific roles are a reflection of the practices they are currently involved in as well as those they have been involved in historically.

Before moving onto the analysis in Part 3, I introduce the research project and two research sites.

The research project

I collected and analysed qualitative case study data from two service learning courses over a two-year period (2004–2005) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where I am currently based. I took an interpretative, qualitative approach in my study as such studies coming from within an interpretative framework allow the researcher to develop narratives and accounts of practice (O'Leary 2004). I analysed interviews from students and educators and also immersed myself in fieldwork with the students in both the classroom and the community context. This enabled me to gain a relatively 'thick description' of the service learning practices (Geertz 1973, 5−6).

Shumer (2000) and Eyler (2002) argue that this approach is increasingly needed in service learning research. Shumer (2000, 81), for instance, argues that quantitative studies are 'not sufficient to support the dynamic, professional practitioner in the field of service learning ... other paradigms and approaches ... are more philosophically consistent and more able to reveal *the fine-grain texture of this work*' (emphasis added).

For Eyler (2002, 6), it is particularly important to recognise that service learning is better researched via 'deeper, more nuanced descriptions of what can be highly idiosyncratic experiences and outcomes'. She argues: 'Service learning is *about doing, about action*, about learning from experience, and using the knowledge and skills learned ... [I]t is *about knowledge in use*, not just about acquiring and being based on facts' (Eyler 2002, 9; emphasis added).

I present an overview of the two case studies to make sense of the analysis that follows.

The fourth year MBChB case: Community-based education in the health sciences

The fourth year MBChB Primary Health Care/Public Health community-based block is a compulsory block offered by the School of Public Health and Family Medicine within the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT for qualification as a medical doctor in South Africa. The MBChB is an undergraduate qualification that runs over six years. Students are required also to complete a seventh year of internship in order to qualify. The fourth year block comprises eight weeks in which students are on site in the community three to four days per week. The block integrates teaching in Primary Health Care (PHC), Public Health (PH) and Family Medicine. The PH section teaches the students about the health of populations. They have to conduct epidemiological research that requires them to employ quantitative methods of biostatistics. They carry out this research, summarise their findings and then present these findings on campus to their epidemiological supervisors, other staff in the departments and fellow students, as well as to members of the community with whom they are in partnership. Based on their findings, the students plan, design and implement a health promotion project with their community partners that constitutes the PHC part of the block.

In the particular project I observed, the students were engaged in a partnership with the South African Domestic Servants and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU). The project with SADSAWU was initiated by Anna, the Site Facilitator from the Health Sciences.[6] It focused on the physical tasks, and the accompanying emotional stress and challenges impacting on the health and safety of workers in private homes that the medical students' project set out to research and make visible. Based on their findings, they then initiated a workshop on occupational health and safety as a health promotion strategy in the PHC section of the block as well as producing a brochure on occupational health and safety issues.

EGS 315S: Field-based research in human geography

The second case study involved third year human geography students in a research and mapping project with a community-based organisation in Valhalla Park, a neighbourhood of Cape Town, the Valhalla Park United Civic Front (VPUCF). EGS 315S is a second semester, third year elective in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences (EGS), Faculty of Science. The course explains how a ‘daily functioning urban system’ is structured and how it ‘works’, with particular attention devoted to circumstances of the South African city.

Together with classroom lectures, there are field-based research sessions. The field research convenor, Susan,[7] negotiates research projects with community-based organisations. These projects fulfil needs identified by the community and in the process students learn field research skills (interviewing and mapping) and gain first-hand experience of problems related to urban geography. In this case the project involved collecting data (quantitative and qualitative) on the lives of people living in backyard shacks in Valhalla Park.[8] The students went on four site visits where they worked with the VPUCF. This service work was aimed at collecting data in order for the civic to negotiate with the City of Cape Town for better housing. Each group had access to a community activist/facilitator or Civic Guide who explained the purpose of the survey to homeowners and requested them to take part. The students also conducted life history interviews with residents of the community that were used by the VPUCF in supporting the quantitative data.

PART 3: UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARY WORK: ILLUMINATING THE PRACTICE

In the final part of the article, I present an analysis of the experiences of two boundary workers, Anna and Susan, through the lens of third generation activity theory.

Experiences of boundary workers: Constraints and affordances

My research showed that as university educators, they are positioned very differently in relation to the higher education-community boundary. It is this positioning that I am interested in making visible, showing how ‘socially powerful, cultural discourses and practices ... position people and provide them with resources’ (Holland et al. 1998, 32). Doing this will also make visible Roth et al.’s (2004) point that identity is much more than ‘embodied thoughts, actions and histories’; making sense of identities is making sense of and understanding the multiple activity systems actors are part of.

Because they need to address often conflicting interests of more than one community of practice, Anna and Susan as potential boundary workers need to carefully manage the 'co-existence of membership and non-membership' of a particular community of practice (Wenger 1998, 110): they are both 'in' and 'out' of practices simultaneously. Both of them show enormous amounts of expertise in negotiating their roles; however, this is not without constraints as the case of Anna illustrates.

MBChB case: Anna as 'activist educator'

At the end of the first meeting with the domestic workers, Anna summarised by saying:

> We need to build together our understanding of what is going to happen. We might even offend each other along the way because we don't fully understand each other's worlds, i.e. what's valued in different places, academically and in organisations (Field notes, 5 October 2004).[9]

Boundary worker expertise

Anna played an important role as a boundary worker in the MBChB case study. She negotiated the project and facilitated the students' access to SADSAWU and, based on my initial observations, it could be argued that she had a lot of authority in this role, namely, division of labour and her role was clear. In addition, she had an excellent knowledge of the requirements of both systems:

> [We] have to be better interpreters in order to negotiate ... *the expectation is that facilitators need to be adequately skilled to address all of those shifts in spaces and discourses and all the interpretations that need to be happening.* We need to be up-dated with the debates in how you need to understand what epidemiological research requires of the student. You need to be able to speak in the epidemiological environment and the community environment. You need to be able to function and interpret information across different learning approaches. Before you secure the project you need to speak about sample size, people accessing it and numbers and all of those things. You need to know what it means for the project if you do or don't secure certain things, and you won't unless you have a little bit of an understanding of research methodology (Anna interview, 9 November 2004; emphasis added).

Anna showed that boundary workers need knowledge of both university *and* community contexts in order to *translate* or broker (Wenger 1998) across the boundary zone. They need scientific, medical and epidemiological knowledge as well as community knowledge and experience. In describing these roles, there was a huge amount of competence evident in her discourse as she showed that she understands two very different worlds, and how to work within this nexus.

In addition, she is also aware of how potentially 'disruptive' the boundary zone can be for the students and so she takes it upon herself to protect and care for the students:

> Different students will take on different values or not within that discourse and change their discourse accordingly or not, depending on how possible it is for them to be a flexible learner, or how secure they can be in that identity. If they can't be they will sift it out all the time so they can stay focused, otherwise they become too lost and at sea. I sometimes caution myself [that] you can't change them into activists because it is damaging to do something like that when they have to go into the next block and be the kind of learner that they have to be in the rest of the curriculum, a kind of learner that has to accept that they are experts and that you don't question certain things (Anna interview, 9 November 2004).

Contradictions and challenges

Anna's role in the university is called a 'Site Facilitator', a role which in the activity system of the university, and the Faculty of Health Sciences in particular, has historically been a complex, almost ambivalent one. Over the years, there have been struggles over their location, conditions of service and status (academic or non-academic posts). Alperstein (2001, 1 in Cooper 2001) argues that site facilitators have

> had equivalent experience and training [to other lecturers], but not necessarily a degree or diploma ... however most importantly, they [are] integrally involved in or live in the specific community chosen. They [are] well informed of community dynamics ... involved in community structures and ... able to operate effectively as the liaison person between the University and the community. This appears to be a crucial requirement for sustainability of site development.

In addition, within the specific course in which Anna was involved, she is not recognised in the same way as other faculty involved in the course, for example, epidemiology supervisors. None of the site facilitators have academic posts; they are perceived as being 'community-based'; and as having a knowledge base that is less formal and scientific than their epidemiology peers. The educator skills that Anna has and which are required for brokering, are not always valued in the university, and thus she does not have the power and credibility that discipline-based academics do. In addition, the division of labour in this course is such that as assessors of the students' work, it is the epidemiology supervisors who ultimately hold the authority. Anna put it as follows:

> Education as such is not really something that a lot of academics are trained in. They are specialists in the area but they have never really had training as educators whereas it seems

> like all the site facilitators have anadult education training. The community perceives me as a representative of [UCT]. In [UCT] I get a sense, and I don't know how right I am, that the Site Facilitators are very much considered community/field workers (Anna interview, 9 November 2004).

Here, it is quite clear that even though Anna is employed by UCT, she is positioned by the university activity system as a member of the community activity system. The community has a contrary view, namely, that she is someone from the university, a view echoed by another site facilitator, Margie:[10]

> Most of the time the community see[s] us as people who can help them ... My neighbours saw me with the students or associated me with the clinic. Yes. The people I stay with look at me for answers. They see me as a resource person [However] I am not always a member of that community because it depends on where I am working (Margie interview, 1 October 2004).

Anna is thus positioned simultaneously in two different activity systems, themselves historically positioned in relation to each other (Roth et al. 2004). The rules and division within the university system – as the powerful system – cause tensions for her and prevent her from having a huge degree of authority (Engeström 1993). As I have indicated, the epidemiology aupervisors have the disciplinary knowledge and the formal qualifications in the field of public health and they grade the final epidemiology projects; there is thus what I am calling an 'invisible but present' authority throughout the block which sets up contradictions in the role of Anna as a boundary worker in the service activity.[11] Much of her work, I would argue, is invisible to the university and therefore not counted or taken seriously.

These different rules and power relations impact on Anna's credibility, confidence and authority. There is a sense therefore that her role as translator, and ultimately as boundary worker, is restricted. However, what I think is really critical, and often ignored, is her huge amount of educational expertise: she understands the disruptive nature of the service learning activity system, and she knows how to assist students to navigate this. We saw this in an earlier quote. Much of the service learning literature refers to this disruption (see Camacho 2004; Boyle-Baise et al. 2006 as examples of this argument). This raises critical questions about the skills, knowledge and values required to do boundary work. Or perhaps more saliently, it asks the question of the ability or willingness of the university to recognise these attributes.

EGS case: Susan as 'activist academic'

Susan then explained about fieldwork research. She said that many people had a different goal for it:

> Mine is that everyone has a good experience but you need to switch around roles in your groups so think about a division of labour. Also, don't think that you can't speak to people about other stuff as you are visiting their house. It is important to introduce yourself, 'I am a student and I am learning how to do field research'.

Susan indicated that the VPUCF guides will give them the more detailed, specific information, this 'keeps the task realistic and puts the Valhalla Park Civic upfront in the project' (Field notes EGS class session, 26 July 2005).

Boundary worker expertise

Susan's case is different. Unlike Anna, who in some ways plays a more directly facilitating role in the activities, even mothering the students at times, Susan plays more of an observer role once the EGS students are out in the field. She allows the VPUCF members to guide the students and advise them in the joint activities that constitute the service learning activity system. So, immediately in this activity system, the division of labour has been set up differently – the civic members are the authorities in the field and guide the students.

However, while she might not be as physically active in the field as Anna, she is also very present: she knows both the community and the university and so is able to be both a strong and credible presence in the community. She is a relatively young but well respected academic for whom activism is an inherent part of her academic identity. Susan is also perceived by her students as having the experience to deal with this course and they value her insight:

> She is not just being an academic; she is really going out there and dealing with communities that are struggling and making them feel a lot better and giving them a lot more hope and drawing them into her life and not just making them feel that they are a part of her life (Student D1 interview, 19 January 2006).

Susan, in other words, understands the rules of both activity systems and this gives her credibility on both sides of the boundary. Her own teaching practice and identity is enhanced through working and learning in teams, and working and learning with off-campus communities. She argues that her engagement and relationships with these communities not only inform her research but serve to sustain relationships critical to her practice, and by so doing, help to construct what she terms 'robust urban knowledge':

> The questions and commitments that underpin my research are thus not only academic, but also social and political, focused on the content of what we teach and how we create in our students engaged and rigorous researchers. Underlying these interests, however, is a political commitment that as researchers we engage with and contribute to those with whom and on whom we do research; in my case, social movements and community activists struggling in poverty ... [T]he academic work we produce grows and is sustained and nurtured within these 'other' processes, building on the relationships that they generate (Oldfield 2007, 23).

Congruence and agency

For Susan, her involvement with the VPUCF is a very intentional action and is linked to her long experience in both activism and the academe. She understands the need to move across multiple activity systems and the significance of this for her own identity and work as a boundary worker. In 2003, Susan wrote about her teaching, and it was interesting that she chose to foreground her activist-oriented teaching in her application, something which is not common practice – particularly at a research-intensive institution like UCT:

> Helping students develop such [field-based research] skills and dedication ... is crucial in our South African and southern developmental context. In order to achieve these objectives, I prioritise working in teams, not only with other lecturers in my department, but also with community-based organizations and activists outside the university, through mutually beneficial projects with my undergraduate courses and post-graduate student thesis work (Teaching Philosophy Statement 2003, 1).

Field-based research therefore plays an important role in helping students to understand some of the theoretical constructs they encounter in their course. In reflecting on how she understands her own teaching role, Susan believes in trying ‘to build a commitment to my discipline (geography) and to precise social science’ (Teaching Philosophy Statement 2003, 1). In terms of the service learning course, a critical part of her role is making students aware that

> communities have all sorts of knowledge and that knowledge is all over the place ... knowledge is not [just] something that’s found up here [the University] ... this is very important value. So [while] it’s the experience of the students and the skills of the students, it’s [also about] knowledge of situations in all sorts of places and which is articulated in lots of different ways (Susan interview, 15 October 2005).

What is evident here is that Susan understands that there is more than one object in the service learning activity system – students do need to understand and be able to discuss critical geographical concepts; however, they need to be able to do this in the context of service learning; there is therefore a ‘service’ responsibility as well. She embodies this in her own practice as has been seen from the quotations earlier. This is what I have termed elsewhere a ‘dual but interrelated object’ (McMillan 2008), that is, both a learning *and* a service object. Such an object sets up a potential contradiction in an activity system. However, because Susan is aware of this, she positions herself and the community in ways that prevents this contradiction. In addition, through her activism, she herself sees a service component as fundamental to her role as an educator. Not all service learning educators do this, often resulting in tensions for students in trying to meet dual objectives (McMillan 2008).

Through both her teaching and her research, therefore, Susan has shown the degree to which she has agency as an academic and as a boundary worker and that this agency is not diminished by engaging with communities; working like this in fact enhances her agency. As a result of this her role and authority as a boundary worker in the context of service learning are substantially enhanced.

CONCLUSION

The current article set out to develop a framework for better understanding the complex nature of service learning as a form of boundary work in higher education. I have argued that the *unit of analysis* needs to be shifted from individualised practices towards the *transaction/boundary zone* and the practices that take place here between very different constituencies – the universities and the communities with whom they are engaged. By drawing on activity theory and the activity system as a unit of analysis, I have provided a way into understanding complex boundary practices. In particular, by focusing on the role of educators, I have shown the challenges and contradictions they face.

This raises an important question: Are the roles of boundary workers in a practice like service learning inherently contradictory and is it therefore necessary to be aware of this from the outset? In many ways, because of the two very different intersecting activity systems, this practice is inherently contradictory. However, such contradictions need not impact the role of the educator to the extent that it did Anna.

Going forward, I believe it is necessary for researchers to understand the role of boundary workers in service learning more clearly, and the service learning practice as an activity system. Mapping this practice as an activity system could highlight what needs to help educators understand the possible tensions and contradictions they may face in their practice. This will assist the university in providing the necessary support for them when they experience conflicts, tensions and lack of credibility in this work. This is important work for the university. As Gibbons (2005, 11–12) puts it:

> It is by commitment to resolving these tensions ... that universities will be able to demonstrate that they have embraced engagement as a core value ... [T]o embrace this form of engagement entails that universities themselves be prepared to participate in those potential transaction spaces in which complex problems and issues will be initially and tentatively broached.

NOTES

1. Quote from Anna, a service learning educator.
2. The data on which this article is based is drawn off research conducted in 2004–2005 as part of my PhD thesis.
3. Please note that my thesis did not focus on student learning per se; rather, I looked

at learning to understand the social practices and activities between students and communities as they engaged with each other.

4. The term 'community of practice' has been extensively used in educational research, particularly that focusing on non-formal learning in the workplace where Lave and Wenger (1999) introduced it early in their work. While applied quite differently by some, it is broadly used to describe processes of learning and participation with others in activities over a period of time. This participation is key to identity formation and the development of social practices.
5. While a key point in situated learning is that people are members of multiple communities of practice – often simultaneously – I was looking specifically at the students in their discipline-based communities and the community they engaged with as activists engaging the students.
6. Site facilitators are university-based and paid educators who have a community development/adult education or health background and experience and who work with the students in the field. Anna (a pseudonym) was the key 'boundary worker' I focused on in this site.
7. Susan (a pseudonym) was the key 'boundary worker' I focused on in this site.
8. The term 'backyard shack' is one of many (e.g. bungalow, Wendy house) used to describe the houses erected in the yards behind the more formal houses in a community like this. This is a widespread practice in South Africa where there are still massive housing shortages and can be seen in many communities. The relationships between the house owners and backyard shack dwellers are complex and beyond the scope of this thesis.
9. This vignette as well as the one for Susan are drawn from my thesis field notes.
10. Margie is a pseudonym.
11. During my research I became fascinated with what I have called 'present but invisible' sources of power and authority. This has much relevance for service learning given the new and different contexts in which it takes place involving new and different (potential) sources of authority.

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