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Depicting difference through community mapping: Using participatory learning action techniques in higher education contexts

Vivienne Bozalek

University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa
vbozalek@uwc.ac.za

Linda Biersteker

Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa
LBiersteker@hsrc.ac.za

Leslie Swartz

Stellenbosch University, South Africa
lswartz@sun.ac.za

Brenda Leibowitz

Stellenbosch University, South Africa
bleibowitz@sun.ac.za

Ronelle Carolissen

Stellenbosch University, South Africa
Rlc2@sun.ac.za

Lindsey Nicholls

University of the Western Cape, South Africa
lenicholls@polka.co.za

Poul Rohleder

Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom
P.Rohleder@anglia.ac.uk

This paper describes the use of community mapping as a participatory learning action (PLA) technique in a cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary higher education context. A group of higher education academics from historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions in South Africa formed a community of practice to devise, implement and research a joint module on Community, Self and Identity during 2006 & 2007. The module involved interaction between senior undergraduate students from Psychology, Social Work and Occupational therapy across diverse institutional contexts. A blended model, where students engaged in face to face and online conversations and were exposed to critical readings on community, self and identity was used. The process enabled students who have been geographically and socially separated in South Africa to become aware of difference in relation to privilege and deprivation, particularly with regard to resources in their communities.

Keywords: Community mapping, historically disadvantaged/advantaged institutions, blended learning, difference

Introduction

This submission examines the value of a participatory learning action (PLA) technique, community mapping, for educating human service professionals in the context of deepening poverty and inequality of contemporary South Africa. It focuses on a transinstitutional and transdisciplinary module entitled *Community, Self and Identity*, designed and implemented in 2006 and 2007 by a group of academics at the Universities of Western Cape (UWC) and Stellenbosch (SUN), and practitioners at Cape Town non-governmental organisations. In this module, learners from two universities were provided with opportunities to engage experientially and in dialogue with each other, reflecting on their communities in a series of face-to-face workshops and virtual learning experiences. This paper examines the extent to which community mapping as a PLA technique provided an effective vehicle for understanding difference, particularly privilege and disadvantage.

Taylor and Fransman (2004, p. 6), in examining participatory learning techniques relevant to higher education in this era, identified the major differences between broad and narrow conceptions of higher education. This paper has as its reference point the broad conceptions which these authors spell out as being important in contemporary times in the context of poverty and inequality – these are: the *reflective* and adaptive *team player* (as opposed to individualist) equipped to respond creatively to change; a contributor to the *lifelong* development of *global citizens*; and *multiple partnerships* to facilitate *knowledge distribution* with an emphasis on higher education's role of *service to society* (our emphases). The Community, Self and Identity module was designed with these broad conceptions of higher education in mind. This paper deliberates upon the extent to which these objectives were achieved, through examining learners' experiences, as expressed in their assignments and reflective essays and their PLA products.

Higher education policy context

In South Africa, the challenge for inclusivity is reflected in many post-apartheid policy documents on education, which have embraced values such as democracy, openness and a human rights approach to education (Department of Education 2001a). Yet despite policy imperatives for transforming higher education in South Africa, there is still a disjuncture between the policies and practices (Carriem 2003). Exclusionary teaching and learning cultures affect students as well as staff in institutions divided by racial and class differences. Subjugated knowledges and students' prior learning experiences remain unrecognised, invalidated or excluded from the curriculum and hence under researched (Bozalek 2004).

The Community, Self and Identity module attempts to address these calls for inclusivity through the use of a PLA technique called 'community mapping' which facilitates a process where students draw their own communities and discuss changes they would like to make to their environments with their peers. This process provides opportunities for both intellectual reflexivity and political consciousness which are designed to assist emerging professionals to be able to make a contribution to the current issues faced in the local environment.

PLA techniques

Participatory Learning Action (PLA) is a group of research approaches which was developed in the UK initially by Robert Chambers (e.g., 1997) and which has been used in both Northern and Southern countries, in a range of urban and rural contexts to establish needs of various groups in communities in order to develop some form of action on the needs. These approaches have in common a critical self-consciousness on the part of the researchers as well as a concern with social justice. The theoretical underpinnings of PLA were in critical theory and in Freirean approaches to adult education which assumes that power and knowledge cannot be separated and uses techniques of critical consciousness to examine social situations (Freire 1970).

The PLA approach can be characterised as a process, not a one-off event which is interactive, uses visual methods, is aimed at action and reflection and is usually practised in a group setting. The attitudes, behaviours and relationships built between the facilitators and group are as important as methods and techniques (Chambers 2006).

Cornwall (1999, p. 1) notes key elements of the PLA approach as being

- a concentration on people as experts of their own lives and the facilitator as a learner and enabler;
- a focus on equity and giving voice to marginalised and socially excluded groups of people such as women, children, those who are rural and poor;
- the use of visual learning methods which are adaptable and used flexibly to learn from and to evaluate people's concerns;
- a commitment to the quality of the interaction and a recognition and concern with diversity;
- an emphasis on self-critical awareness of both facilitators and participants;
- a conscious move away from knowledge for the sake of knowledge to knowledge for action and empowerment.

The interactive methodology allows for the development of new insights and action plans, while the visual techniques are accessible to people of differing levels of literacy while these different types of representation themselves may act as a catalyst for different ways of thinking and knowing.

Rationale for the choice of PLA techniques in the transdisciplinary collaborative module

State policies have identified the necessity for multi- and trans-disciplinary teamwork in service delivery to address poverty and inequality in South Africa. This imperative calls for the commitment and will on the part educators and learners in the higher education sector to engage in innovative collaborative endeavours. A central concern for human services professions currently in South Africa is the importance of transforming relations between students from Historically Advantaged and Disadvantaged Higher Education Institutions (referred to hereafter as HAIs and HDIs) and between professions which are differentially placed in terms of status recognition, and in terms of access to resources.

With these concerns in mind, the project team met to deliberate upon the best pedagogical practices to engage students across differences of profession and institution. Learners studying at HAIs, such as Stellenbosch University (SUN) in this project, come from relatively privileged sectors of society, with access to better secondary schooling education and literate parents as well as other privileges and resources than their counterparts at HDIs, such as UWC. In order to deal with these inequitable relations of power, it was decided that PLA techniques would be a suitable modality for learners to begin their engagement with each other. It was anticipated that due to their differing academic literacy skills, engaging immediately in writing exercises would disadvantage students from the HDI, thus privileging the group of students who were already in positions of relative privilege. Furthermore it was assumed that engaging in PLA experiential exercises – in both drawing and reflecting their communities would lead to more participatory parity between learners from different professions and institutions. Participatory parity, a concept which Nancy Fraser (1997, 2003) uses, refers to the ability to participate in a full and equitable way as full partners in interaction with others. We anticipated that this would happen as the privileged group of students would be in a situation of learners from those who had experienced greater levels of discrimination. We knew that students between HDIs and HDAs had very few opportunities of interacting with each other, due to apartheid legacies of geographical separation which continue to affect interactional patterns of communication in contemporary South Africa. In providing learners with opportunities to work collaboratively on the themes of community, self and identity, it was hoped that they would be able to become more aware of differences and inequitable economic, social, political and cultural structures and practices. It was also hoped that the process of doing, deliberating and dialoguing would create opportunities to become aware of and interrogate power relations, and that this in itself would have an empowering effect.

We considered PLA techniques to be a useful pedagogical tool for a number of reasons. Firstly, the techniques allow learners to consider issues of where they have been placed in relation to resources and the privilege and harm emerging from their positioning in relation to resources in the light of their own experiences. Secondly, students are given the opportunity to interrogate their everyday social practices by engaging in PLA techniques, dialoguing in virtual and face-to-face environments with their peers, as well as reading and commenting on critical texts on community, self and identity. Waghid (2001) contends that critical educational discourse is not enough in itself, but that it is necessary to engender self-reflexive inquiry by requiring students to analyse texts from the perspective of their own lives and experiences.

One of the major goals of having students engage in the PLA exercises is for them to come to the realisation that it is possible to occupy contradictory positions of privilege and disadvantage. Sharing stories from their PLA drawings also has the potential of providing an opportunity for learners to critically view their understandings of social issues by exposing them to the differential impact that these issues have had on their own lives and those of learners from other institutions and professions. It was hoped that there would be opportunities for learners to challenge each other so that knowledge could be deepened (VeneKlasen, Miller, Clark & Reilly 2004).

The project and participants

In 2006, the 7-week “Community, Self and Identity” module was taken by approximately 95 students, half of whom were studying fourth year Social Work at the UWC and half of whom were study Community Psychology in Psychology Honours and the Bachelor of Psychology at SUN. In 2007 the module was extended to include Occupational Therapy students at UWC as well, totalling 105 students.

The project began with a workshop held at the UWC at the start of February in both years, which was attended by all the students and facilitators. Students were assigned to workgroups of six students. Each group was divided to include a balance of students from each discipline. Students were then randomly selected to fill these allocations. Students remained in these workgroups for the duration of the project.

In terms of identifying details, in 2006, the majority of the SUN students were white (73%) with no African students, and spoke Afrikaans (53%) or English (38%). Among the SUN students were four exchange students from the Netherlands who had enrolled in the community psychology course. In contrast, the UWC students were coloured (62%) or African (38%), with no white students. The majority spoke Afrikaans (44%) or one of the main African languages (in this case isiXhosa and seSotho) (34%). The UWC students were generally older than the SUN students, and the overwhelming majority of students were female (86%).

In 2007 the pattern was similar with the majority of SUN students White (70%) and at UWC coloured (62%) or African (32%). Students at SUN spoke English (41%) or Afrikaans (29%) while at UWC they spoke predominantly English (49%) while 32% speak African languages. An overwhelming number (91%) of students across disciplines and institutions were female. A significant change in 2007 was that UWC students dominated the groups, with each group of 6 or 7 students having only one Stellenbosch Psychology student. Being the only representative of their institution may have been problematic for Stellenbosch students who were many white, as they may have felt marginalised and unable to express themselves fully. It is also recognised that whites have difficulty in talking about race and apartheid (Rohleder et al 2008). The composition of the group is, however reflective of the population in South Africa.

The course consisted of two face to face engagements, one at the beginning of the course, and one at the end. One face to face engagement was held at each university, so that students could experience the other learning environment, and so that one particular institution was not privileged. The first face to face engagement focused upon PLA techniques. After this event students were required to engage in online communication sessions with members of their group; hand in several worksheets to their group facilitators; engage with selected course readings; write a final reflective essay on the course; and prepare for the final face to face engagement, at which the groups had to do a power point presentation on their experience of the course to the rest of the class. The table below depicts a synopsis of the module:

Table 1: Outline of the Project

Timing	Activities and Content
First one day workshop at Historically Disadvantaged (Black) Institution	E-learning training
	Input on PLA techniques – origins and what they are. Experiential exercises in community mapping and life river.
	Group interactions across institutions and professions, sharing of PLA exercises, narrative exercises sharing, meeting over tea and lunch.
First E Postings Week 1	Students post responses to images of PLA drawings of community and life line which have been uploaded and responding to others group members' responses. Worksheet on workshop experiences and what was learnt about self, own profession and institution, others' professions and institution, PLA. Reflection on own work, the impact of the responses of others on students' perceptions of themselves, their communities. Reflection on community map and life river of one person from neighbouring institution.
Second E Postings Week 2	Students reflect on community maps from students from other profession/institution in their workgroups. Comments posted to group's discussion forum on the commonalities, differences and themes which emerge. Students respond to postings on their exercises
Third E posting Week 3	Students engage with literature provided online on 'community' and 'community work' and other sources with posting to group on how they view the notion of community integrating thoughts on readings, personal and professional experience and those of group members.
Fourth E posting Week 4	Students post comments on two other group members, one from another discipline on their notion of community
Ongoing	Group project preparing Power Point presentation of learnings about relationship between identity, community and professional practice.
Second Workshop at Historically Advantaged (White) Institution	Presentation of group projects.
Reflective Essay Week 6	Students submit a short essay paper on what what you have learned through working together, how it was learned, specific processes that facilitated your learning, how learnings connect to previous understandings of notions of 'community', 'self' and 'identity', influences if any for future work, as well as evaluative comments on what was useful or less useful in the resources, products, tools and activities.

Community mapping

At the initial workshop, students were asked to make drawings of their own communities. Students shared and spoke about their drawings within their groups. This gave them the opportunity to explore and interrogate their own constructions and ideas of ‘community’ and those of students who may be perceived as different from them in terms of their racial, class and gender identities. The community mapping was both explained by the facilitators and written instructions were available in Xhosa, Afrikaans and English, the predominant student languages.

Community mapping

- Step 1 Draw a picture/map of your home and neighbourhood including the resources that are there.
- Step 2 Identify and label three things that you would like to change (these could be physical things or relate to attitudes or social issues).
- Step 3 Share in your group, explaining your picture/map and the reasons for wanting things to change.

Figure 2: Community Mapping Exercise

Examples of student's drawings - community maps

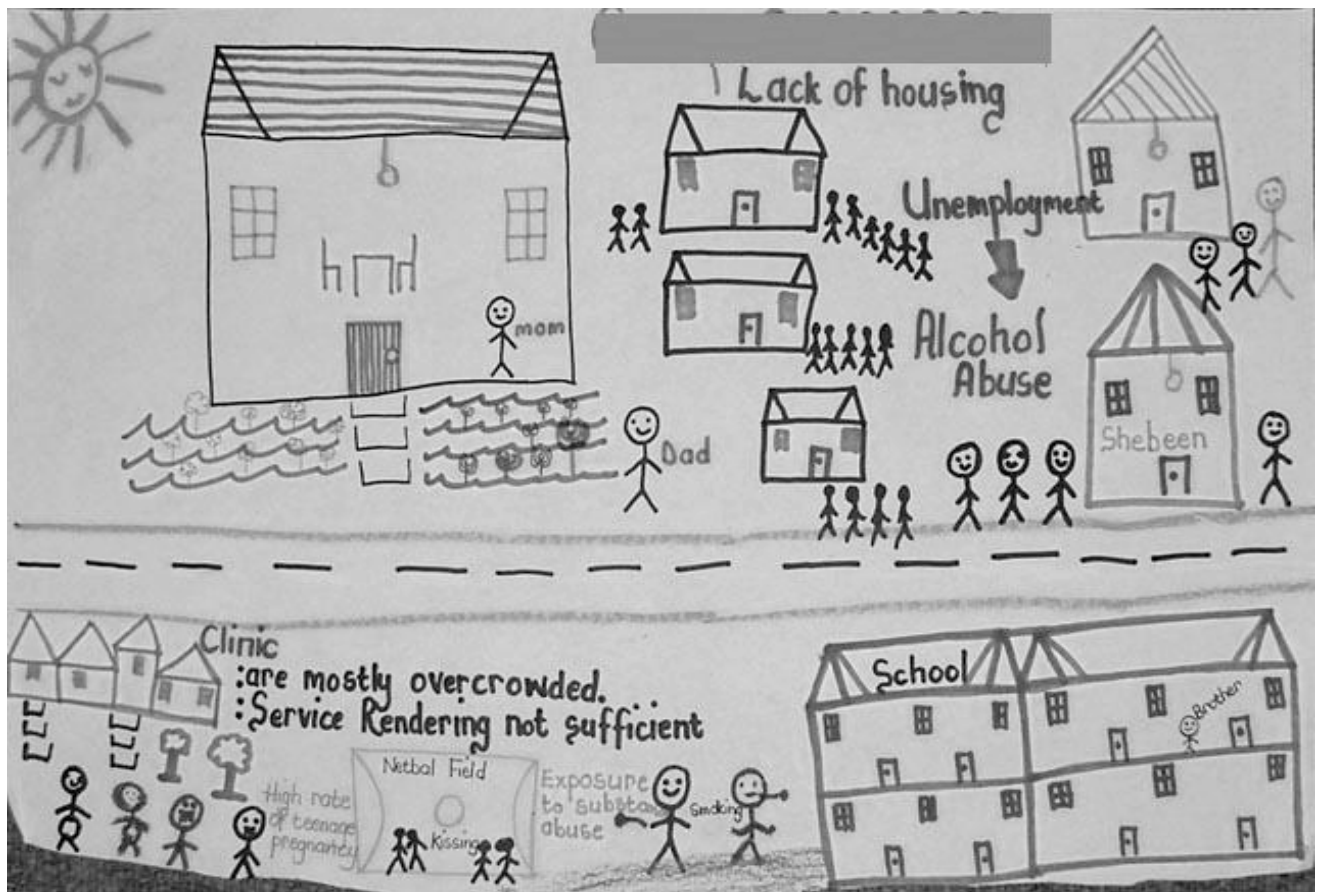


Figure 3: Urban community UWC student 2007

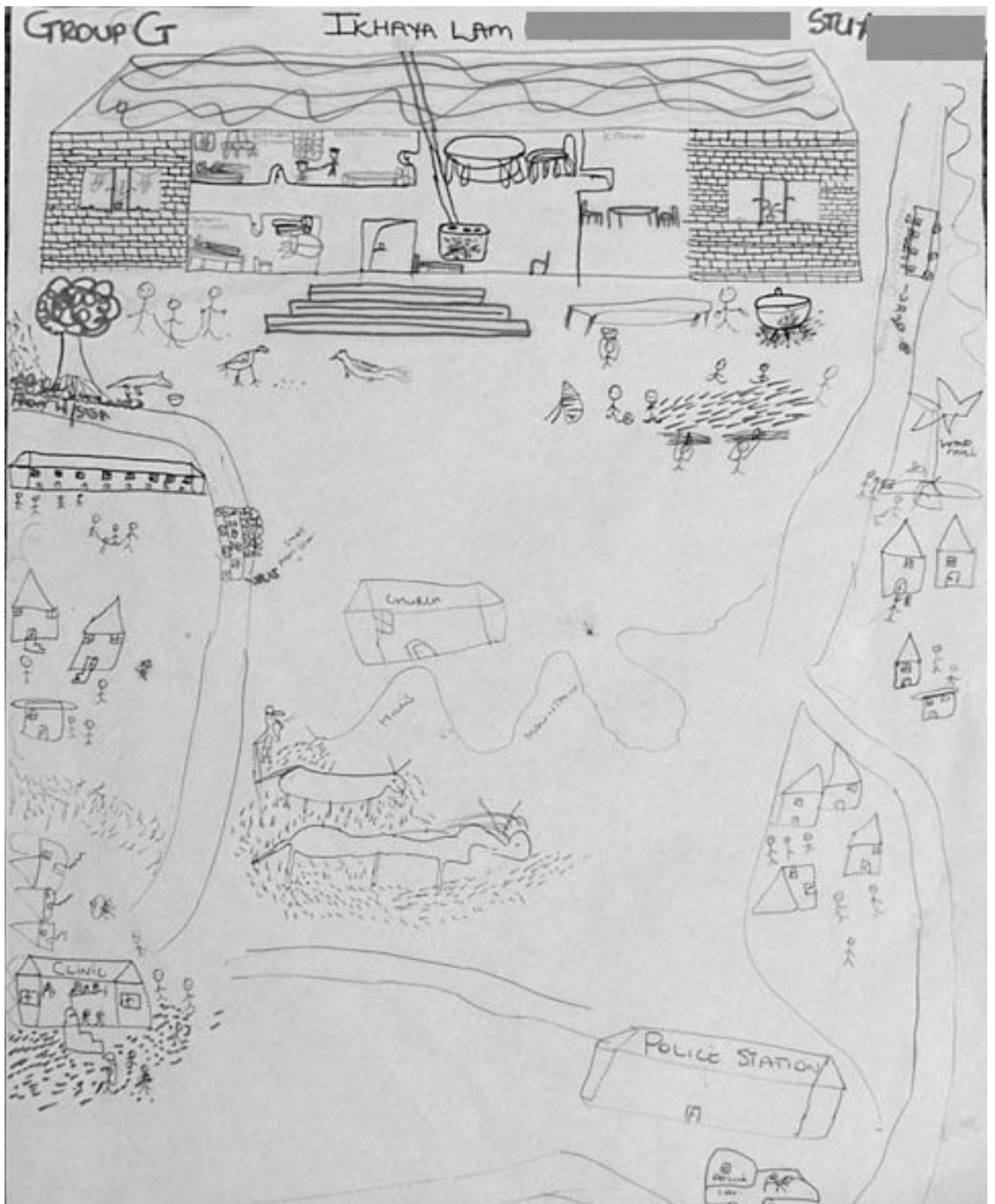


Figure 4: Rural community UWC student 2007

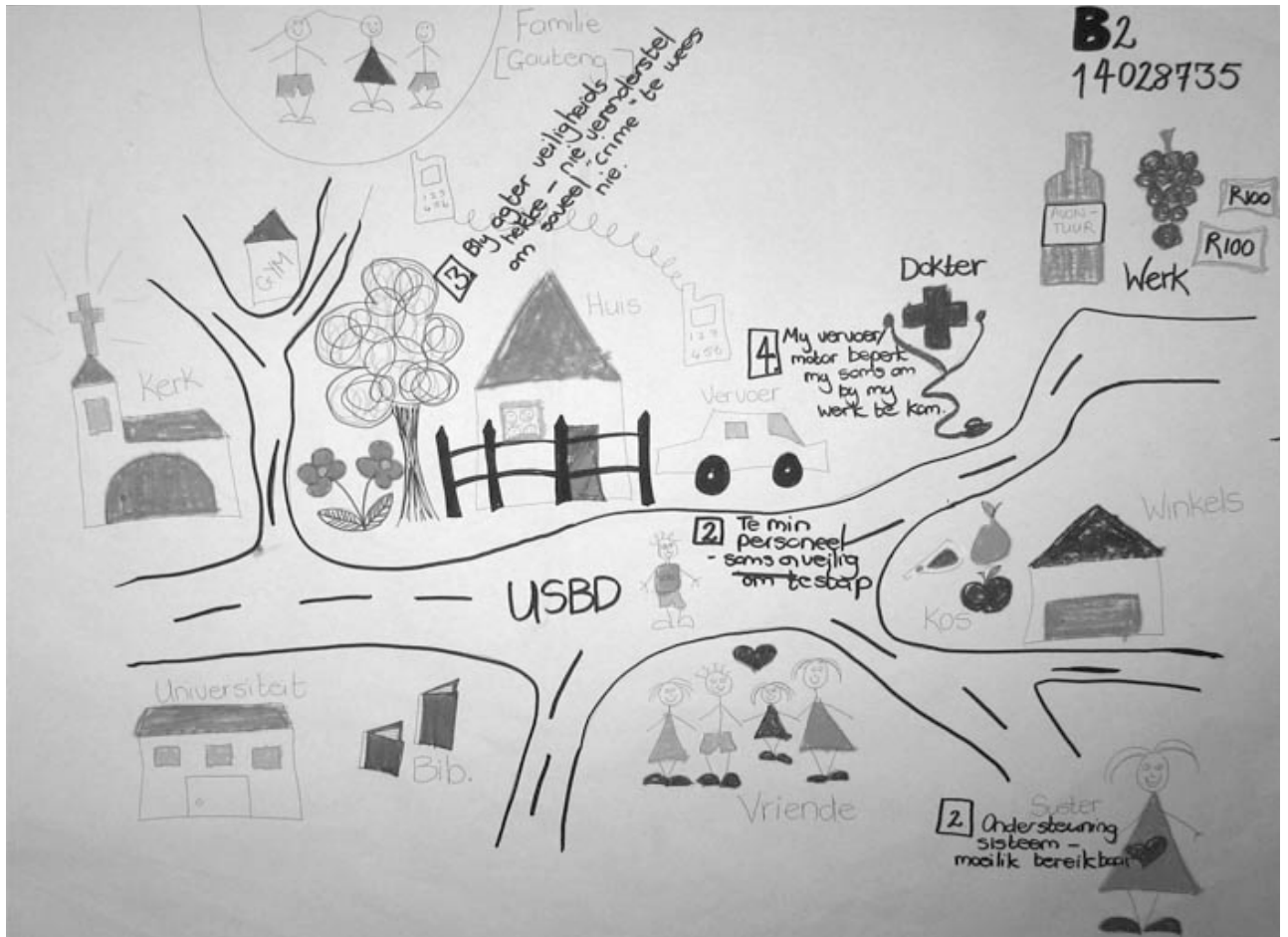


Figure 5: Urban community SUN student 2006

Figures 3, 4 and 5 are maps of three very different communities and the challenges faced by people living in them. Figure 3, drawn by a coloured student at UWC shows a typical urban working class community with poor overcrowded services, high unemployment leading to many people on the streets, *shebeens* (small informal businesses that sell alcohol) which contribute to crime and a lack of safety, a lack of recreational facilities, and exposure at school to substance abuse and other peer pressures. In contrast Figure 4, Ikhaya Lam (My home), drawn by an African student from a rural area shows a community lacking basic infrastructure, such as clean water and sanitation, having to fetch wood for fuel and vast distances to basic services such as the clinic, police services, school and to church. This isolated rural environment is one in which children play safely together. Figure 5 depicts the affluent university town of Stellenbosch where facilities and resources are abundant, as are part-time work opportunities. The student's chief concerns were for her personal safety on account of crime, and that her family support system is far away.

The PLA techniques were designed to provide students with adequate space to be able to express themselves in relation to their experiences of marginalisation and privilege. The goal was to provide an opportunity for students to externalise issues – in other words to

regard them in the complexity of their socio-political context rather than seeing them solely as personally or internally generated.

Students' reflections on community mapping

In their worksheets on the workshop experiences and reflective essays (see Figure 1), students gave many examples of how community mapping foregrounded inequities of power and resources and at the same time several students, indicated their own feelings of marginalisation in relation to certain majority social systems. For example a student wrote of recognising her feelings of inferiority with dominant languages and other races. Another indicated feelings of inferiority because of her impoverished rural background as indicated below.

“Lack of resources was brought across the communities and lack of development was common in most of the communities but I felt so small ...if I may say because I was the only person talking about the rural area which was no one else brought up and this made me feel that my group members might be shocked about how bad rural areas are.”

Reflections on differences in access to resources indicate that relatively privileged students from both institutions were shocked by their ignorance of the vast discrepancies between communities while others felt challenged to address the root causes of these imbalances.

“Generally one does know that not all communities have available running hygienic water. Group discussion made me aware that people in my group don't even have running water at home. This made me aware of the fact that I was once again taking privileges for granted.”

“The discrepancies in the distribution of resources among various geographical communities were highlighted. Some group members regarded this state of affairs as natural and not necessarily problematic, while others were plagued [by] this injustice. The first-world/third-world dichotomy urged us all to consider the roots of this issue as well as contemplate whether and how these imbalances may be rectified”.

In discussing these experiences and making them visible in these small collaborative learning communities, community mapping provides the opportunity for students to consider both the impact of the local socio-political context, and their agency in relation to this context, and so to generate alternative stories that could be useful for them in their personal lives and in their practice as human service professionals.

Diversity

An appreciation of diversity is an essential requirement for inclusive practice and the group experiences were especially useful in providing an opportunity to dialogue in a diverse group. Many students described their discovery of new aspects in relation to communities, relationships and sociocultural practices.

“I have also learnt that in South Africa there are communities in which neighbourhood is of greater value. For example in the maps from East

London I could see the relationship that exists in that community in the way she made her drawings. On the other hand I could see that in town everyone mind his or her business. They turn to stay in doors and in wall fences. ...people townships, their socialization is not only limited to their houses instead it reaches out to other members of the community."

Some students reflected on the implications of diversity for their future professional practice.

"I've learnt that diversity does not necessarily translate into tolerance or acceptance (this inference is based on my own community). I've learnt that even though our communities share some common attributes, they are not homogenous, they are places that tell of unique stories and are alive with unique experiences, which workshops such as these allow us to share and learn about, hopefully in the process fostering true integration."

Change agents

In relation to commitment to action and change, the mapping of students' communities and sharing of these appeared to be a powerful stimulus for them thinking about themselves as change agents both for students from poorly resourced communities and for privileged students who were humbled by their privilege and felt a sense of responsibility and social justice.

"This was a great tool in making us (a)ware to what is really need in our communities and that we can became change agent for our communities. We can be that resources in our communities, meaning the people is also usable assets not tangible thing."

"The most thing that i also learnt about myself is that, i can have the potential to change my own community after that drawing experience."

"The community maps were a great idea. I learned a lot from this exercise. I was reminded of just how fortunate I am to have resources so readily available to me. I also learned the conditions that many of my colleagues have faced. Many of them do not have the most basic of resources available to them in the places where they live. The impact that this exercise had on me cannot be emphasized enough. It strengthened my desire to get involved in the community and to make a change, as small as it may be."

The above quotes in which students who identify themselves as historically privileged in relation to the stories and pictures of their peers could be seen as a contribution to the notion of 'responsible well-being' posited by Chambers (2004). By 'responsible well-being' Chambers refers to the recognition of obligations to others - doing as well as being in an inclusive manner. Chambers particularly singles out the privileged as being important to engage with in relation to making changes to achieve responsible well-being.

The major issue is how to encourage and enable the powerful and wealthy to accept this ideal, or something close to it, and to define it for themselves in

ways which make things better for those who are weak and poor...
(Chambers, 2004, p. 19)

It would seem as community mapping has the potential to allow students to cross boundaries of difference in terms of privilege and could begin a process of developing Chambers' notion of 'responsible well-being' amongst human service professionals who otherwise would not have the opportunities to engage with one another.

Conclusion

Community mapping provided an effective tool for students to examine how they were positioned in relation to their own resources and trajectories, and evaluate this against those of their peers. This was evident in the maps uploaded onto the virtual learning environment and the students' written tasks reflecting on the process of community mapping. The students' maps and reflective writing provided insights into the particularity of what resources are needed and the contexts in which these resources are needed, in order to flourish as human beings.

By sharing their drawings and stories, students were able to acquire a richer understanding of privilege and deprivation on both an experiential and conceptual level and were able to gain access to knowledges that had previously been obfuscated due to apartheid geography and its subsequent effects. This provides the potential for privileged students to begin to exercise 'responsible well-being'. Learners were able to begin to interrogate notions of community that were hitherto taken for granted. Hopefully students will ultimately be able to apply this process of self-reflexive-directed learning to other areas such as their practice in fieldwork and their future work with each other as professionals in addressing and challenging the structural sources of poverty, inequality, oppression, discrimination.

This paper has looked at the role of PLA techniques in addressing and redressing inequities and forms of marginalisation in South Africa, however, these techniques have been used in countries both in the North and South, usually by NGOs. The potential for using PLA techniques needs to be more fully investigated in higher education institutions, where issues of diversity are increasingly being foregrounded.

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