REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING IN ECONOMICS AND FINANCE: CONSULTANCY PROJECTS THAT LINK TEACHING AND RESEARCH*

Ingrid Schraner & Edward Mariyani-Squire
University of Western Sydney

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on four years of experience teaching and evaluating a compulsory third year capstone unit called Economics and Finance Engagement Project at the University of Western Sydney, in which students solve real-life business problems simultaneously adding to the body of academic knowledge. Based on an understanding of community engagement as a reciprocal endeavour, academics and industry or community partners develop consultancy projects that can be undertaken by students to address actual problems. The scope of such projects allows, encourages and enables students to contribute to improvements in ortho-praxis and ortho-doxis. The paper examines what third year students need to learn in order to undertake consultancy projects, industry and community partner needs in this setting, and the demands of this approach on the academics facilitating it. Integrating these three perspectives and putting them in the context of the literature on service learning and community engagement, the paper concludes that there is no substitute for authenticity in engagement in both its forms, engaged teaching and engaged research – an insight that poses considerable challenges for academic administration and leadership.

Keywords: undergraduate teaching, service-learning, community-engagement, the teaching-research nexus.

JEL classifications: A20, A22

* Correspondence: Ingrid Schraner, School of Economics and Finance, University of Western Sydney, Parramatta Campus, ED.G150, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW, 2751, Australia; E-mail: I.Schraner@uws.edu.au. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 16th Annual Australasian Teaching Economics Conference at the University of Technology, Sydney, 30 June-1 July, 2011. Thanks to participants at the conference session and the referee for comments and suggestions.
1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers of economics at the tertiary level have come under considerable fire in recent times for their poor pedagogical practices (see, for example, Becker, 1997; and Becker & Watts, 2001). They continue to use traditional methods, according to these arguments, rather than methods that engage students more effectively and therefore enhance student learning. One suggestion that has been made to improve this performance has been the idea of “service-learning” where students examine real-world problems that benefit the business community in some way, as part of their economics study (see for example, McGoldrick, 1998). Another has been the idea of “research-led” teaching that engages both students and academics by bringing together both dimensions of academic work into a single approach (Zamorski, 2002).

This paper outlines an initiative at the University of Western Sydney which applied the concept of service learning to the design of a compulsory third year undergraduate subject in a unique way. Practicing economists were brought into the classroom as facilitators in order to coach students in the practical skill of working as a consultant. These economists teamed up with the subject co-ordinator to help students develop consulting skills as they worked on real, community-based consulting projects. As part of their work on these projects, students researched the latest ideas in a range of economic specialist fields and used these ideas to address the challenges of the projects on which they worked. The approach thus incorporated dimensions of research-led teaching so that students learned to “think like economists” (Siegfried et al., 1991) in a very practical way and extended the discipline’s knowledge base by writing up their experiences with the application of these ideas to provide a series of case studies that could be used to evaluate the application of economic ideas on a small scale. The paper thus outlines an initiative which applies the concept of service-learning and also considers the relationship between teaching and research, both within the context of significant community engagement, an approach not often found in economics teaching.

The paper first provides a survey of the literature on service-learning, community engagement and research-led teaching in higher education. It then outlines the particular institutional context within which this novel approach to teaching an economics and finance
capstone course was developed. It reviews the teaching and research dimensions of the community-engagement undertaken in the initiative, and provides some insights into the wider context of the relationship between teaching and research that emerged from the initiative. It then undertakes an initial evaluation of the teaching approach and considers some key challenges that need to be addressed for such an approach to be successful. A final section concludes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
The teaching of economics in general, whether combined with research or not, is today a topic fraught with controversy. A pervasive theme in the criticisms of undergraduate economic education is that it is overly formalistic and narrowly theoretical, resulting in graduates who do not think critically about dominant underlying assumptions, are not aware of the social, political and moral dimensions of economic phenomena, and are not familiar with or able to deal with concrete ‘real world’ problems (Fullbrook, 2002; Ormerod, 2003; Rankin, 2002; Becker, 2007; Colander & McGoldrick, 2009a).

These criticisms of content have been accompanied by criticisms of the methods used to teach economics, especially the traditional “chalk and talk” approach, which may be well-suited to what Nobel Prize recipient Ronald Coase (1970) called “blackboard economics” (Becker & Watts, 1996, 2001; Watts & Becker, 2008) but it fails to engage students in a way that leads to more effective learning. The result appears to have been significant student dissatisfaction (see Ongeri, 2009) which has taken a number of forms: dissatisfaction with the apparent ‘real world’ irrelevance of the theory taught (Krueger et al., 1991); alienation of sub-groups including women and non-Anglo-European ethnicities who find that the particular economic issues facing them are ignored by mainstream economics (Jackstadt & Grootaert, 1980; Bartlett, 1996); and declining student enrolments in undergraduate economics degrees (Siegfried et al., 1991; Siegfried, 1995).

These outcomes, especially the problem of declining enrolments, have motivated the development of a variety of new approaches to the teaching of economics. One of these approaches has been experiential learning. Experiential learning was originally explicated philosophically in the context of work-integrated learning by John Dewey (1938). He argued that learning is an iterative process of
developing socially useful concepts based on interaction between the active observer and the observed phenomena. This connects well with the learning cycle as a cognitive schema for experiential learning as outlined by Kolb (1984). Kolb’s learning cycle integrates four stages of cognitive activity: (1) concrete experience of ‘real world’ phenomena; (2) reflective observation; (3) abstract conceptualisation and generalisation in the light of reflection and theoretical frameworks; and (4) active experimentation (testing concepts and generalisations in new situations). The last stage feeds back into the first, such that ‘real world’ phenomena can be re-experienced with greater understanding than was originally the case.

Experiential learning in economics, first explicitly discussed in an English-speaking context by Spencer & van Eynde (1986), finds expression in techniques designed to transform the student from a passive recipient of knowledge into an active participant in the learning process. Techniques that are being explored include simulated games, role-playing, case studies, experimental activities, and problem-based activities (Bartlett & King, 1990; Becker, 1997, 2000; Wentland, 2004). These techniques are usually inserted within a pre-existing course and do not involve direct interaction with the ‘outside world’.

One innovative approach that does entail interaction with the ‘outside world’ is community-engaged learning, (called work-based learning in the UK and service learning in the USA). In essence, community-engaged learning requires that students use their accumulated knowledge to work with a stakeholder in the community in order to investigate some issue or problem of concern to the stakeholder. This particular experiential approach to learning has its origins in Herman Schneider’s work on co-operative education in engineering at the beginning of the 20th century (Waters, 1947) and Jean Trepp’s (1939) development of field work educational practices.

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1 Spencer & van Eynde (1986) were also the first to introduce economics educators to Kolb’s learning cycle.

2 It should be noted that these three terms are not regarded as interchangeable by all authors and the definitions of these terms are still evolving (Furco, 2003). For example, McGoldrick (2002) takes ‘service learning’ to be an umbrella term that covers four distinct ‘models’: community service; action research; community problem solving seminars; and student-based instruction. What McGoldrick calls the ‘action research’ model – where students work with community stakeholders to “design and implement a project with the goal of aiding the organization (or community)” (McGoldrick, 2002, p.21) – comes closest to what is called a ‘community engagement project’ in this paper.
for economists in the 1930s. However, experiential learning based on community engagement received no serious attention as a pedagogical practice in business-related courses until the end of the 20th century (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; McGoldrick, 1998; Godfrey & Grasso, 2000; McGoldrick, Battle & Gallagher, 2000; McGoldrick & Ziegert, 2002).

To be clear, community-engaged learning is to be distinguished from voluntary work, placements and internships in a number of ways. Most importantly, the former requires that students: (a) operate in a collaborative and reciprocal partnership with stakeholders\(^3\) (Furco, 1996; Zlotkowski, 1999; Seifer & Connors, 2007); (b) apply theories and methods they have acquired during their degree to investigate a concrete phenomenon motivated by a stakeholder’s concern (Banks, Schneider & Susman, 2005); and (c) critically reflect on the value of their acquired theories and methods as well as the practices they encounter in the ‘real world’ (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Dorman, 2002; Dubinsky, 2006; McGoldrick & Peterson, 2009).

Further, community engagement often incorporates (d) student team-based planning, coordination and structuring of tasks designed to solve a concrete problem in a feasible manner (McGill & Beaty, 2001). It has also been suggested by some that an addition should be (e) students’ learning-cum-research should have an explicit ‘public interest’ orientation (Dorman, 2002; Wharton-Michael et al., 2006; Yapa, 2006; McGoldrick & Peterson, 2009).

A variety of applications of this approach to learning economics have been trialled (predominantly in the USA), albeit mostly in small elective courses. Examples of such applications include investigation of the impact of non-profit organisations on women’s welfare (McGoldrick, 1998; McGoldrick & Peterson, 2009), land management (Haines, 2002; Matthews, 2002), provision of healthcare to the poor (Caplan, 2002), demand for local public services (Horrisberger & Crawford, 2007), how to improve wage rates for low income workers (Banks, Schneider & Susman, 2005), the economic effect of a university on a region (Brooks & Schramm, 2007), how non-profit agencies deal with poverty and homelessness (Elliott, 2009), and business plans for agricultural producers (Curtis & Mahon, 2010).

\(^3\) A ‘stakeholder’ can be any agent in a local community or the wider society, such as a non-profit organisation, a community group, a business, or a government.
Although still in its infancy, the existing literature suggests that, \textit{prima facie}, community-engaged learning yields substantial pedagogical benefits beyond the ken of the traditional “chalk and talk” approach. Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott, & Zlotkowski (2000), for example, argue that engaged learning has the capacity to enhance technical, cognitive and citizenship skills among students. Others have found that engaged learning enhances students’ self-perceived competencies, self-awareness, and self-confidence (Curtis & Mahon, 2010; Schraner & Hayward-Brown, 2010); that it results in a heightened sense of responsibility (Boss, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999) and political consciousness (Banks, Schneider & Susman, 2005); that it improves and strengthens the relationships between students, the academy, and the wider community (Arney, 2006; Elliott, 2009); and that by providing a direct link between prior ‘academic’ knowledge and ‘real-world’ applications it enables students to gain a greater understanding of theoretical concepts (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Godfrey & Grasso, 2000; McGoldrick & Ziegert, 2002; Hoyt, 2003; Elliott, 2009; Curtis & Mahon, 2010).

A second and more recent method that has been suggested to enhance the pedagogical quality of higher education teaching is some form of \textit{inquiry-based} or \textit{research-led} teaching. This approach attempts to engage students by: recounting the process by which research is conducted and leads to the uncovering of new disciplinary knowledge; incorporating questions from large research projects as course assessment items and teaching students basic research skills that enable them to answer these questions; or allowing students to pose their own research questions and similarly teaching them the skills they need to answer these questions.

Zamorski (2002), for example, looks at the experience of students at the University of East Anglia where they were exposed to the process of undertaking original research and provides a case study of how students may be directly involved in research as part of a senior undergraduate course. Brew (2003) also examines how students may be involved in “communities of practice” as part of their undergraduate study at the University of Sydney. Justice \textit{et al.} (2009) examine how inquiry-based learning can be introduced into junior undergraduate subjects which also incorporate more traditional forms of face-to-face teaching and then expanded as subjects become more advanced. All of these variations on the theme of research-led
teaching are designed to facilitate the more active involvement of students in the learning process and to bring together what are often seen as competing aspects of academic work: teaching and research.

What appears not to have been contemplated in the literature to date is the possibility of combining community-based or service learning approaches to teaching with enquiry-based or research-led approaches. The following section thus outlines the context in which an initiative at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) attempted to do just this.

3. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The foundation of the initiative outlined in this paper was a decision at UWS a decade ago to introduce more effective and up to date pedagogies reflecting the kinds of analysis outlined in the previous section. UWS thus embarked on a community-engagement agenda and based its vision for this community engagement on the definition advanced by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching:

Community Engagement describes the collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

(Carnegie Foundation, no date).

As part of the University’s community engagement agenda all disciplines introduced compulsory capstone units in the 3rd year of their degrees. In the business degree, these units aim to:

. . . provide student exposure to the ill-defined nature of problems in business, the multi-dimensional nature of the issues, and to force them to consider not only the nature of the problem but also how realistic their solutions are.

(College of Business, 2006)

In an internal discussion paper within the School of Economics and Finance it was proposed from the beginning to combine engaged teaching with engaged research when implementing this University initiative. This would take the form of consultancy projects in which students would provide solutions to problems posed by local industry and community partners using the knowledge they had developed in their studies, and would further develop over the course of the projects. Students would also work on these projects under the guidance of coaches and mentors (School of Economics and Finance,
The approach of the School thus deliberately introduced a research dimension into the University’s community-engagement strategy partly due to the importance of research in the School’s own strategic objectives. This posed, however, some challenges for the design of the program to ensure that the research element was effectively linked with its consulting dimension.

The School of Economics and Finance also decided that rather than sending students out to work for a semester in the workplace, the community or industry partner would come to the classroom. These partners would use this contact to coach students on the nature of the problem to be solved and the context in which it had arisen, and would work with students to solve the problem in an ‘on the job training’ type environment. Thus rather than students work for a consulting firm which would then be hired by the industry partner to address a particular problem, the partner would have direct contact with students via the community-engagement project.

Given that the capstone unit being developed would be a compulsory core unit for 100 – 150 students at the time, this seemed a more practical solution with less organisational and administrative resource requirements, which nevertheless would allow for an authentic experience of the work an economic or finance consultant would undertake.

The experiential learning provided in this way sits well with a community-engagement perspective. While community-engaged learning is one form of experiential learning, it differs from other forms of experiential learning in similar ways to those identified by Seifer & Connors (2007, p.6) for service-learning. More specifically, the value proposition of service-learning is not as one-sided as it is with volunteering, nor does service-learning have the technical or individual development focus of an internship or field study.

Incorporating appropriate research features into the course was also challenging. For academic endeavours to be accepted as authentic and genuine research they need to: (a) have a clearly identified research

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4 While the criteria for such an acceptance are necessarily subject to rigorous discussion within and between disciplines, we follow here the current minimum requirements by the auditors of the research bureaucracy of the Australian Federal Government, because of their practical relevance: if the research undertaken in the context of this combination between community-engaged teaching and research does not comply with the administrative requirements, any external research income academics involved generate
question; (b) follow an identifiable research methodology; and (c) aim at producing research publications. This means that activities that aim at combining teaching and research need to aim at genuinely finding out something new in an academic context. In other words, the academics developing teaching that relates to such activities need to be explicit from the very beginning about what they want to find out, how they want to find it out, and in which academic context they want to publish the findings. An attempt was therefore made to build these features of research into the design of the consulting projects that would form the core experience of the Economics and Finance Engagement Project unit.

In the specific combination of community-engaged teaching and research developed for the unit, the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge has two key components:

- community or industry partners receive a consultancy report based on state-of-the-art economics and finance research, that addresses an issue with the potential of enhancing their practice, and which challenges their conception of current ortho-praxis (the right practice);
- students address an issue that challenges their own understanding and that of their discipline, and in undertaking the necessary research to answer the partner’s question, they develop existing academic knowledge, challenging current ortho-doxis (right teaching and disciplinary knowledge).

Obviously, developing projects that contain both of these components requires considerable work and good collaboration between the community or industry partners and the academics involved. For this work to be practically viable and sustainable, it needs to provide benefits to both sides that go beyond the delivery of an undergraduate capstone unit. The following sections explore each of the teaching and research dimensions of this challenge in more detail.

4. COMMUNITY-ENGAGED TEACHING

While students remain based at the university rather than at the offices of the partner organisation in the UWS scheme, they do undertake real

in the process will not be registered as such and the academics lose the recognition that results from generating external research income.
work for the community or industry partner and this experiential learning provides opportunities for critical reflection. This reflection is an essential part of the unit of study. Students keep a reflective learning journal throughout the semester and use the last week of semester to write a reflective learning statement. At the beginning of the semester they are given readings on how to use the technique of journaling (Smith, 2006) and throughout the semester they are given guidance as to how they can use Kolb’s learning cycle to develop a reflective learning statement out of the material in their journal (Smith, 2001).

Over the years, a number of changes have been made to teaching practices within this unit to facilitate this kind of reflective learning. The first change was to introduce a clear distinction between the journal and the statement, in order to emphasise for students the importance of reflecting on how their thinking about their learning had developed over the semester. They were then asked to report the results of this reflection.

A second change was the introduction of a workshop on a very basic version of Kolb’s learning cycle and some small group exercises in class to identify the four steps of: concrete experience; observation and experience; abstract conceptualisation; and testing in new situations. While this improved students’ recognition of learning outcomes, it became evident that they needed more support in the development of critical thinking skills in order to recognise the full benefit of the learning experiences implicit in their reflective learning statements.

Students are also given a project scope from the community or industry partner in the first week of semester, against which teams of students develop tender documentations which demonstrate how they plan to address the problems at hand in the consultancy projects. They have to include a work breakdown structure document that outlines their initial understanding of the work involved, their plan to spread the work over the available weeks and between students in their team, their assessment of team members’ other commitments, their plans to ensure effective communication within the team and between the team and the client, and last but not least, how they plan to make use of their existing knowledge. They also have to demonstrate how they will make adjustments to their plans when, as is common in
consultancy work and in research more generally, new discoveries make existing plans obsolete.

Teaching students the practical components of a good tender documentation is a formidable task in its own right. However, making students plan their research over a whole semester is a serious challenge even for the most experienced adult education specialist – not least because it is equivalent to changing bad student habits that have formed over at least two and a half years at university. It involves equipping students to tackle group dynamics in a firm but open and supportive way, confronting them about the level of their commitments outside university, and overcoming their lack of time management skills. It also involves supporting them through a sometimes painful re-evaluation of their priorities.

Over five to six weeks the students then undertake the research for the consultancy project they had planned in the tender documentation and prepare a final report, which addresses the issues raised in the original project scope. This consultancy report, together with a presentation to the community or industry partners is worth 50% of the students’ final mark, the tender documentation 20% and the reflective learning statement 30%.

In this phase, the role of the teacher as facilitator is particularly important, as the students embark for the first time not only on doing research, but on a process that doesn’t have a pre-determined “correct” outcome. Most of the class time is spent by the teacher and the industry partner separately spending half-hour blocks with each group. While it is only half an hour of contact with the lecturer, the retention rate of what is discussed is significantly higher than if the results of such discussions were lectured to the whole class. It could, of course, be argued that this holds for all university teaching. However, there are additional issues to be considered that are specific to community-engaged teaching and learning.

While at first glance this unit outline may look very different from what Herman Schneider at the turn of the century before last saw as co-operative education (Walters, 1947), or from what John Dewey advocated as experiential learning in the 1930s, it draws heavily on insights from both of these early theoreticians of work-integrated learning as well as on some of the service learning literature that grew out of these insights.\(^5\) In particular, the nexus between teaching and

\(^5\) See (Schraner, 2008) and (Urzua & Schraner, 2008) for a discussion of these issues.
research made here relies heavily on two aspects that are discussed extensively in this early literature.

The first aspect is the particular kind of teaching employed in work-integrated learning (WIL). Following Dewey (1938), WIL practitioners draw on the specific learning that results from ‘on-the-job’ training, where practitioners coach students. While community-engaged teaching discussed here relies heavily on the learning that results from the coaching role of practitioners, further research into its specific contribution to student learning in our course is needed.\(^6\)

The second aspect is the role of reflection in such a non-traditional learning set-up. Reflection is a key component that community-engaged learning shares with other forms of experiential learning. Students need support in learning how to think about their own learning in order to become successful lifelong learners.

These two aspects of the community-engaged teaching in this course are illustrated in Figure 1. The key learning outlined in this figure is one of the findings of a study that articulated the student-identified learning outcomes contained in the reflective learning statements in the first two years of the unit (Schraner & Hayward-Brown, 2010). The figure summarises two dimensions of these outcomes: first and foremost students’ realisation of the fact that if they do not provide a good research result, practitioners do not have a good foundation on which to base changed practice. This gives the

\(^6\) In 2011 this coaching role had to be provided by academic tutors rather than industry or community partners. One of the two tutors was a well-known and well-liked academic, while the other was an industry-based casual tutor who had worked on the previous year’s team of industry partners. The latter was perceived very differently by the students in 2011 and was confronted with a very different set of student attitudes, behaviours and questions than in the previous year.

The anecdotal evidence of the consequences of this loss of authenticity in the organisational setting is quite stunning and would point to a particular issue requiring further investigation, namely that coaching by practitioners as opposed to coaching by academics contributes much more to learning – or, more precisely, to more of a particular kind of learning – than is commonly recognised in academic contexts.

McGoldrick and Peterson (2009) and McGoldrick (2008) for example describe different course scenarios in which academic instructors successfully coach small groups of students in courses using experiential learning. The coaching of students is an important factor in students achieving the full benefit of their experiential learning in these courses. However, the coaching by academic instructors is not a substitute for an authentic experience of industry or community partners’ involvement, because the experiential component is provided by a more traditional service learning component. This is, however, a very different course structure from the consultancy set-up discussed here.
students’ research an authenticity that provides a unique impetus for hard work and outstanding performance.

The second dimension of learning outcomes is the experience that whatever students bring with them from other parts of their lives beyond what they have learned at university can be harnessed to contribute to their team’s result. For many students this is a key experience that validates, for the first time in their university lives, their backgrounds as valuable resources. Mitchell & Donahue (2009) have highlighted a number of potential pitfalls in a service learning context if this dimension is not considered very carefully when projects are selected and project scopes developed. On the other hand, if projects support students in considering and valuing their own backgrounds, learning can go far beyond what university teaching normally achieves (Schraner & Hayward-Brown, 2010).

Teaching thus takes a very different form in the UWS community-based learning unit from the traditional “chalk and talk” approach of economics classes. It focuses more strongly on facilitating and enabling students to learn for themselves, and thus involves skills that economics instructors may need to develop. However, this is precisely what the pedagogical literature has been demanding and it leads to more effective learning outcomes as will be discussed below. We turn now to consider the research dimension of our community-based approach.
5. COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

Figure 1 emphasises the central role of the students in undertaking research within the UWS unit. Using the same kind of approach, Figure 2 illustrates the nature of the research process itself. This representation highlights the fact that neither the academics nor the practitioners had answers to the research questions that confronted the students. Rather, academics and practitioners served to support and facilitate students in their discovery of answers for themselves by being available to help students frame problems and formulate methodologies for approaching problems. In this sense, academics and practitioners merely provide guidance to the students who themselves undertook authentic research.

The key learning mentioned in Figure 2 was expressed in one way or another in most of the student reflective learning statements analysed in Schraner & Hayward-Brown (2010). Students found it noteworthy that at the end of semester, after all the trials and tribulations, they handed in a consultancy report of which they could proudly say ‘we did it’. For most students undertaking real research was a novel experience, and acting and being treated as professional consultants was new for them. For most, this was initially a very confusing setting, and one with which they struggled. Many expressed the view that they drew a lot of confidence from the fact that in the end they succeeded.

Students achieved this sense of accomplishment because the problems they addressed were such that students immediately sensed
that they did not have ready-made, theoretically neat solutions to them. Students quickly realised that these real world problems were complex and multi-dimensional in ways that no single theory they had previously been taught was capable of addressing.

It was this apparent sense of theoretical intractability and its associated initial anxiety that spurred students to develop their own multifaceted, creative responses, and to use previously learned curriculum content to generate solutions. The best student teams produced responses that included the methodological insight that the relationship between idealised theories and ‘real world’ economic phenomena is problematic. In fact, these responses also included an understanding that solutions to the practitioners’ problems required that they render this relationship problematic.

This meant that not all student teams produced material that could be published *per se*. Nonetheless each group’s contribution constituted a component of an overall package of evidence against which theories could be evaluated. The best student teams did however, put forward solutions and relevant links to curriculum content that, together with and in the light of all the related evidence, provided enough substance for a refereed journal article. Although these claims need to be examined in more detail, a number of demands on project scopes that work can already be outlined here.

Chief among these is the impact that such an approach has on the relationship between the university and the community. It would be somewhat artificial to limit the ‘collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities’ and ‘the context of partnership and reciprocity’ identified earlier in this paper to the relationship between students and practitioners. Research cannot be limited simply to its *execution*. The identification of the question to be explored, in our case the development of the project scope, also comprises part of the research process. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the context of the actual consultancy project undertaken by the students and to consider what differentiates the development of an engaged research project as opposed to that of an applied research project the students could undertake.

If ‘collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities’ and ‘the context of partnership and reciprocity’ are constituent for engaged research, then we will also need to consider the impact they have both on the academics and practitioners
involved. We will need to review in more detail the process of identifying consultancy projects that are able to challenge ortho-praxis and ortho-doxis, and to investigate how the wider context can be harnessed for the mutual benefit of academics and practitioners.

Figure 3 illustrates the process of identifying potential consultancy projects that involve community-engaged research by undergraduate students. As can easily be seen, this process needs a significant amount of interaction between academics and community or industry partners and thus is time consuming and labour intensive. If academics and practitioners are expected to embark on such a process, there need to be significant benefits beyond the actual undergraduate teaching, and at least some of them need to be enjoyed by those who undertake the work of developing the projects.

![Figure 3: The Process of Identifying Projects for Community-engaged Undergraduate Research](image)

In Australia’s current university landscape, academics are primarily rewarded for publications and, in some contexts to a lesser degree, for attracting external research income. Industry and community partners often do not have the funding to pay commercial rates for an economics or finance consultancy, yet they may have some limited funding that could be used as seed money.

In such situations it can be worthwhile to consider the wider context of a ‘collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities’ and to investigate a range of opportunities for a ‘mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources’. If each student team develops a consultancy report based on authentic
research, then it could be worthwhile to consider from the outset the organisational framework under which some of the best students can be hired to deepen and widen the research undertaken by the teams in large classes. While it will be additional work for academics and practitioners alike to supervise and mentor undergraduate students as research assistants, funding provided to pay students can be included as personnel expenses on a small research project.

Such a small research project costs the industry or community partner a fraction of the full consultancy work that is being undertaken, and the formal collaboration with a university may provide significant non-monetary benefits to the organisation. But most importantly, the community or industry partner can evaluate the pros and cons of such a collaboration on a ‘try-before-you-buy’ basis.⁷

For the academics involved there are additional demands on time and supervision when working with an undergraduate student as a research assistant. Yet having seen the student teams working on their reports, the academics would have a good basis for selecting the best students with minimal supervision requirements. And if a research project can be established, the research income and the eventual publication count towards the academics’ track record in this regard. The additional recognition from external research income may well more than compensate for the additional supervision requirements.

If the collaboration between academics and industry or community partners is successful and they want to embark on further joint research, the small project provides a track record for the partnership, which is well regarded in any competitive grant scheme for three reasons. First, it provides evidence of partner commitment beyond the actual dollar amount the partner can contribute to the large project. Second, it allows particularly early career researchers to demonstrate their ability to lead a research project as chief investigator. And third, joint publications provide evidence that the collaboration is productive. In addition, a substantial part of a literature review will be available and the research question and methodology will have undergone some rigorous questioning in the discussions that ensue between academics and practitioners following some of the issues,

⁷ The benefits of this kind of ‘starting small’ have been outlined by Tayebjee & McGovern (2006) in the context of establishing a cooperative education program at UWS with small and medium enterprises in Greater Western Sydney. These enterprises are among the key employers of the University’s graduates.
which questions from undergraduate students are likely to bring up.

Perhaps most importantly, the joint work will have clarified a number of issues concerning the roles of both partners – and raised others. Harnessing these issues for a discussion of the methodological implications of a research setup that includes practitioners as research partners rather than as the funders of applied research, will benefit any grant application.

Lastly, the trajectory of securing external research funding and undertaking a small research project at the end of the undergraduate consultancy projects provides a staged approach towards a university-industry or community collaboration, including clearly identified exit points, at which the collaboration can be successfully ended. Particularly for early career researchers and those working at less well established research universities or those working within communities that do not have large amounts of funding available at the time, this is an important consideration (Tayebjee & McGovern, 2006; Urzua & Schraner, 2008).

Most universities have internal grant schemes that encourage collaboration with outside partners. The University of Western Sydney for example operates a competitive grant scheme called UWS Research Partnership Projects, where the university matches partner funding dollar for dollar up to $20,000. These grants are designed for research projects that have the potential to lead to Australian Research Council Linkage Grant applications. They can provide an opportunity for some of the students who worked on the small research project to undertake their Honours project in the context of a wider research collaboration.

6. EVALUATION, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
The success of the approach taken in the Economics and Finance Engagement Project unit is evidenced primarily by its expansion over the years it has been operating. It has expanded both in the number of students taking the subject and in the number of community organisations signing up as consulting partners. The course started out as an elective in the Bachelor of Economics in 2008 with a cohort of 24 students who were divided into four groups. The industry partner was an economist working on local economic development at Fairfield City Council, a severely disadvantaged area by any measure
Table 1: Economics and Finance Engagement Project Topics 2008

- Understanding the Poverty Trap in Fairfield Local Government Area
- Manufacturing Industry Decline and the Responses to Structural Unemployment
- Understanding Affordable Housing and Shared Equity Housing as it Applies to Fairfield Local Government Area
- Economic Development Strategies and their Application to Fairfield Local Government Area

In Greater Western Sydney. The topics of the four groups in this class are listed in Table 1. Of these four projects, all were completed and feedback was very positive from both students and the consulting client for three of them. Student journals and learning statements indicated that students involved in these projects had very positive learning experiences. While the fourth project was completed successfully, feedback from student journals and learning statements was less positive, and the quality of the report was not as high as it might have been. While part of the explanation for this outcome may lie in the composition of students that made up the group that completed this project, the project topic allowed students to stay within the boundaries of what they had been used to; in other words, it didn’t force them out of the academic “ivory tower” (see Schraner & Hayward-Brown, 2010 for further discussion of the educational issues associated with these outcomes).

The following year the course became compulsory for the students in the first cohort of the Bachelor of Business and Commerce for all students majoring in economics or finance. There were three classes of 20-24 students with the topics listed in Table 2. Given that the course size had tripled, we contacted the economic development unit of a second local council in Greater Western Sydney, Parramatta City Council, who took the third class, while the first two classes were taken by the same economist from Fairfield City Council, with whom we had worked in the previous year.

By the following year the Bachelor of Business and Commerce had reached its full capacity of between 120 and 150 students and it became clear that (a) the supply of economic projects appropriate for
Table 2: Economics and Finance Engagement Project Topics 2009

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<tr>
<th>Class 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land Rent and Land Use Theory – Retail and Commercial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Land Rent and Land Use Theory – Industrial Lands</td>
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<td>Population Thresholds and Market Trade Areas</td>
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<td>The Impact of Town Centres on Residential Population</td>
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<th>Class 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Supply Chain Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth of Fairfield – Statistical Profile</td>
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<td>Best Practice – Community Renewal</td>
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<td>Indigenous Peoples of Fairfield – Statistical Profile</td>
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<tr>
<th>Class 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visitor Accommodation Availability in the Parramatta Local Government Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribution of the Cafe-Restaurant Sector to the Parramatta Economy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Impact of the Proposed Carbon Trading Scheme on Parramatta Businesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Industry Clusters Located in the Parramatta Local Government Area</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

this kind of project was limited; and (b) the amount of different topics one course coordinator could deal with in any one semester was also limited. We therefore teamed up with two more local councils. In 2010 we thus had three classes addressing the same issues but in the context of three different local councils, namely Fairfield, Parramatta and Strathfield. The four groups in each of those classes looked at ethnic businesses and their connectivity with their country of origin, with each group addressing Chinese and one other of the four most numerous ethnicities present in the area. Strathfield Council directly hired two students to expand on the research undertaken by the class. The remaining three classes dealt with projects as diverse as the economic situation of kinship carers, statistical profiles of particular neighbourhoods, and demand and supply of high quality office space.

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8 In this particular year, a large number of Chinese exchange students were joining the class and were distributed so that each relevant group had at least two of them.
In 2011 we used the approach of the first three classes for all under the heading ‘Local Labour Markets – Youth, Women, Migrants and Over 45s in Auburn, Holroyd and Parramatta’. The students used census data for the statistical subdivision Central Western Sydney, which covers the statistical local areas of Parramatta South, Inner, North-West and North-East as well as Auburn and Holroyd – which conveniently gave each class a statistical local area and then four groups to investigate, in the context of the then current debates on how to increase labour market participation.

The reports were of such interest that Auburn City Council, who was not involved in preparing and running the projects, funded four Winter Vacation Projects in research mentoring to develop the results of the 24 reports into a refereed journal article. Out of the four students who undertook these projects, three are currently enrolled in an Honours degree, and two of them are planning to go on to undertake a PhD.

The program’s expansion thus reflects its underlying effectiveness in enabling students to produce consultancy reports based on their research which clients valued very highly and which led in at least one case to an academic publication. There are, however, a number of challenges to delivering such results that must be kept firmly in mind.

In our experience, the major challenge for a teaching-research nexus in a community-engagement perspective lies in the fact that when it comes to authenticity, there is no space for half measures. The two key learning aspects discussed here, ‘students count’ and ‘students can do it’, cannot be achieved in a simulated environment. Further work is needed to investigate the key aspects of the coaching role of practitioners and how exactly it strengthens student learning beyond what academics can provide. It is expected that the reflective learning statements of the 2011 student cohorts will provide invaluable insights in this regard, particularly when compared with the 2010 and earlier cohorts, because in 2011 the coaching in half of the classes was provided by an academic who is well-known to most students, while the second coach was industry-based and had already taken classes in 2010, together with other industry and community partners.

A second challenge for this approach lies in the intensive preparation that is needed. Elliott (2009) argues that although the benefits of engaged learning outweigh the costs but the costs are nonetheless substantial:
Beyond the usual costs in establishing a new teaching approach, faculty members in service learning oriented disciplines will incur additional costs that relate to: (1) identifying and establishing strong community relations; (2) building community needs into the course content; (3) establishing the process of evaluation; (4) student training; and (5) research/teaching tradeoffs. 

(Elliott, 2009, p.275)

Thus, our approach only pays off if and when the research is taken further and includes external research income and publications. This makes it a high risk strategy, which is not for the faint hearted. Colander and McGoldrick found that

The typical economics professor is not well trained to guide students through moral reasoning or civic engagement activities, for example. His or her interests are likely to centre on problems that are susceptible to formal modeling and statistical testing, rather than on policy questions that involve complicated ethical or moral issues.

(Colander & McGoldrick, 2009b, p.27)

Our approach requires a wide range of skills on the part of at least some of the academics involved, including first-hand experience not only with consultancy work, but also with managing consultants from a client perspective.

In addition, at least one academic on the team has to be experienced with research administration in order to avoid mistakes that can be costly in terms of foregone recognition of research income that does not fit traditional moulds and research auditing practices. However, once processes and administrative procedures that minimise efforts are established and good communication channels with university research offices and engagement departments are opened, these small research projects can be replicated without too much effort on the administrative side.

And last but by no means least the small research projects that can result from community-engaged undergraduate teaching connected to research can open pathways towards more relevant and better recognised research outside the discipline’s ivory tower. In turn, this

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9 In order to appreciate the magnitude of this challenge within the discipline of economics, one can refer to the surveys into teaching methods used by economics instructors in the United States undertaken by Becker & Watts (1996; 2001) and Watts & Becker (2008) – and the titles or sub-titles of their publications: ‘Chalk and talk’ (1996), ‘Still chalk and talk’ (2001), and ‘A little more than chalk and talk (2008).
research may then open new ways back to more relevant teaching in economics and finance in general and beyond the token engagement units in particular – an improvement for the whole economics curriculum.

7. CONCLUSION
This paper has outlined a way in which students can be taught to “think like economists” (Siegfried et al., 1991; McGoldrick, 1998) and at the same time can be supported when they are undertaking their first steps out of the proverbial academic ivory tower. While it is true that there are an unfortunately large number of academic economists who have precious little to say about the real life economic problems at local, national and international levels, it is also true that the extended preparation phase provides a good opportunity to check whether the collaboration can work and the proposed problems can actually challenge both, ortho-praxis and ortho-doxis.

Once the extensive preparatory work required for a successful undergraduate course that combines community-engaged teaching and research is undertaken, a lot of the groundwork is laid for successful community-engaged research projects with trusted partners, for substantial contributions to a publication portfolio as well as for the nurturing of larger cohorts of well-trained research students. In our experience this also included community and industry partners who decided to undertake further studies and developed into some of the most interesting research students.

REFERENCES


Consulting Projects that Link Teaching and Research  65


Consulting Projects that Link Teaching and Research


of the World Association for Cooperative Education WACE Asia Pacific Conference, pp.556-563.


