

Balancing the Politics of Academia with World Politics and Social Engagement

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Introduction

Researching, teaching, fundraising, and administrating are some of the various roles carried out by 21st century academics. Within the industry there are pressures to be exceptional teachers, leaders, learners, writers and to carry out the aforementioned whilst simultaneously balancing demanding administrative duties; including marking, meeting with students and applying for funding. However, some academics may feel compelled to carry out additional duties. Indeed, some researchers may find it difficult to bracket themselves, their beliefs and values out of their career, let alone their publications. Accordingly, their personal views in regard to social justice, sustainability in the context of the environment and peoples infiltrate into their work resulting in activism which seemingly adds a fourth corner to the already established and crowded demands of the average lecturer.

To Eschle and Maiguashca (2006) activism and academia have been historically defined as opposite/contrasting worlds where the important part in the latter is to theorise, to exercise cognitive skills and be impartial while the focus in the former is about action, being partisan and embedded in the everyday 'real' world. As such, activism in academia has demonstrated two opposing corners as theoretical output often takes precedence over praxis. To Maxey (1999) the concept of activism is discursively produced and influenced not just by the people involved in action but also by media, popular knowledge and common sense. Although, Maxey (1999) does not ignore that activism, even if discursively produced, requires and relies on action but also in a deeply engaged critical reflexivity. Following the approach offered by Eschle and Maiguashca (2006) and Maxey (1999) it seems possible to engage both academics and students in action-based transformational experiences that could lead to deeply engaging reflexive moments. On the one hand, activism teaches students to inform themselves, engage in politics and significantly, in the context of their learning be reflexive, as well as apply their knowledge and the theory attained within the classroom. The application of ideas following theoretical debate allows a space for students to reflect on their learning. Accordingly, activism within university contexts has a unique

pragmatic element, in addition to enhancing the overall university experience for students, which is often a major goal for universities. Simultaneously, opportunities exist for staff involvement and engagement in meaningful exercises. At times universities are not always perceived in a positive light with the notion of the 'ivory tower' dominating some people's perceptions; due to the lack of understanding regarding what scientists and social scientists do, the flexibility of lecturers working schedules, opportunities to work from home, generous holidays and the notion that research is at times not broken down and communicated to the layperson. Therefore, engaging in a collaborative process alongside students provides opportunities for lecturers to not only *interact* with their students, but try and *relate* to their students and *learn* from them, breaking down the hierarchal barriers. Additionally, the process of practical collaboration among students could demonstrate students' understanding and appreciation of the theoretical elements taught in the area of tourism and sustainability and how this applies to real life situations.

In another way social practice and/or activism within higher education gives way to another platform for encouraging student and academic engagement. Perhaps, Thaler and Sunstein's (2009) theory of the 'nudge' is appropriate here. The authors define a nudge as a way 'to push mildly or poke gently in the ribs, especially with the elbow' in an effort to 'alert, remind, or mildly warn another' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009: 4). Therefore, just as governments remind citizens of the impacts of over consumption with food and/or alcohol and the implications of sedentary lifestyles, lecturers can endorse engagement in extracurricular activities that may reinforce key concepts and principles taught in class. Furthermore, lectures have the opportunity to lead by example, encourage practical engagement and bring about benefits to the wider community.

In 2011/2012, believing in the possibility to use social engagement to promote educational moments and critical reflexivity the authors of this paper established a Non-Profit Organisation called 'Academics for a Better World'. The paper takes a case study approach with the aim to describe the inherent tensions, challenges and opportunities for activism on university campuses. The paper describes the personal sense of responsibility felt by the two lecturers which motivated them to initiate the concept on their respective university campuses in both Scotland and Sweden. The paper explains how the concept has been received by both staff and students, the various events organised on both campuses and opportunities for such organisations in light of broader university development goals such as employability strategies and community engagement.

The Academics for a Better World Initiative

As academics involved in teaching and/or researching in areas related to ethics, responsibility and sustainability in tourism, the authors of this paper had an innate feeling that their students could be more engaged in action-based transformational experiences. It was November 2011 when the authors had a conversation about the frustrations and anxieties of early career academics. From that conversation emerged the idea to create a group that could stimulate students to engage with extra-curricular activities encouraging a platform for students to apply the 'sustainable' theory learned in lecture theatres. The group was initially established on the University of the West of Scotland campus with a membership of ten students who were responsible in defining how the group would work and the intentions moving ahead.

Four main areas of action were selected including the environment, social justice, children and development. These areas were then reflected in the aims of the group:

1. "Help to influence change in people's attitudes toward climate change, recycling and healthier living.
 2. Spread the issue of the importance of education to everyone living being in the world, their right to it and how simple it is to give.
 3. Promote the benefits of a just world and encourage others to voice their opinion.
 4. Develop ideas on how sports can bring the world together and help relationships thrive"
- (Academics for a Better World, 2011).

In order to transfer ownership to the students it was felt that the aims of the group, as well as the activities promoted should emerge from their own perceptions of the world and of their community. For this reason the two groups (Scotland and Sweden) organised different activities beginning in the fall 2011/2012 that would fit in the original concept of the group in promoting critical reflective actions.

Scotland

In 2012 three main actions were made by the group formed at the University of the West of Scotland. The first was to create a photo competition in the university that would be followed by a photo exhibition fundraising project to support a 17-year old Scottish male preparing to go overseas to carry out some volunteer work in communities in Malaysia and Borneo. This first project raised more than 100 pounds. A second initiative facilitated the planting of 60 trees between the Hamilton and Paisley University campuses. The Woodland Trust organisation was contacted and supplied the trees which were subsequently planted by staff and students. It was verified that for most of the

students this was the first time they had planted a tree. The third initiative was to enter a competition organised by the WildHeart Foundation charity. The main event organised by WildHeart was the micro-economic challenge called Micro-Tyco. The challenge combined philanthropy with entrepreneurial efficiency. With a £1 input from the WildHeart foundation the different teams had 1 month to raise as much as they could using microeconomic techniques. The money made via the challenge was then distributed by the WildHeart Foundation to institutions who aim to empower poor communities in 26 different countries. The Academics for a Better World team managed to transform £1 into over £550.

After the first year of events organised by the Academics for a Better World in Scotland a meeting was held at the end of the year in order to corroborate and reflect on the learning outcomes and the engagement in the year's activities. Students pointed out an increased awareness in some of the global social issues including economic inequalities. Beyond the global perspective students pointed out the importance of planting trees on the university campus as a way to enhance their connection with the university and the local area. Students emphasised that the trees would always represent the link between the university and themselves.

The University of the West of Scotland is located in one of the most deprived areas of the United Kingdom and the attempt to contribute to the development of the region is clearly in line with the university's strategy. The University indeed supported the activities carried out by the students and this facilitated a better link between students and the organisation. Financial support was offered for some of the activities such as the photo competition and senior management demonstrated their support to the project and allowed the staff to have 5% of the activity plan dedicated to the development of activities.

Sweden

All students in the Human Geography Department including International Tourism Management students and students studying at the Masters Level in the Tourism Destination Development Programme were sent an email in the fall of 2011/2012. The email described the basic concept of Academics for a Better World and directed them to the website initially set up by the Scottish group. After about a week or so a meeting was arranged for the 20 interested students to meet and brainstorm some ideas of specific activities that they may be interested in engaging with. An activity strategy was then put into action with a number of students taking the lead for each.

The first project was to work on creating a logo that would be representative and identify the group. As such, the students decided to create a poster advertising Dalarna's first ever student group with the interest of raising awareness and campaigning for social justice, the environment, children and sport engagement (see Figure 1 below). The students also lobbied with the University to donate a number of Dalarna prizes and memorabilia to encourage submissions. Posters were hung all over campus, in student residents and wider Borlänge to encourage participation. The students were overwhelmed with entries, and formulated a committee to choose the winning submission (see below Figure 2).

Figure 1: Logo Design Poster



Figure 2: Winning Logo



(Erika and Maria, 2011)

Next, in February 2012 the students organised and carried out a 'fika' (bake sale) requesting donations for The Swedish Childhood Cancer Foundation. A couple of students kept track of a schedule in regard to what students would contribute and the period of time they would work at the stall selling baked goods. The students raised 841 SEK (approximately £100) in one afternoon.

In April 2012 a few students in the group organised a charity concert. The students assembled a band including 4 musicians, a local church for the concert in Borlänge and a number of sponsors including local cafes for door prizes and gifts for the musicians, a music store for the use of their technical equipment, the Falun Music Conservatory for the use of their instruments and a regular space for the band to practice. The whole group donated their time and efforts to make baked goods, coffee and tea, collect donations and hand out leaflets. The group again asked for donations and raised over £350 which was donated to a soup kitchen in Borlänge.

The last activity that the group participated in was a running and walking race which took place at the end of May 2012. The race is called 'Blodomloppet' and raises awareness and money for Giving Blood in Sweden. The students sought and received private sponsorship from a local business in Borlänge which paid for the entry of a team of 6 to participate.

Dalarna University was very supportive of the groups' achievements and efforts. Consequently, the Head of School paid for an end of the year celebration which consisted of a celebratory meal out with the entire group before students left for their summer holidays to show their appreciation and support. There was some discussion from an administrative perspective, to consider the amount of time staff spent on the project. As such, it was suggested that some hours could be assigned to one's involvement in the initiative in the future.

Upon reflection the students put forth that the group encouraged them to think outside the box, encouraged reflexivity and allowed them to meet others and make contacts with people within the school and community which were opportunities they may not have otherwise had. Some of the challenges faced by the group included having to try and nudge other students to get involved, attend meetings and carry their weight which was compared to their struggles working on group assessments. Furthermore, some students articulated disappointment as they put great effort into planning each project and did not always feel as though they had the support of their peers and lecturers.

Conclusion

Even if supported and encouraged by Universities, activism does not seem to be recognised by modern universities. Rather, the focus continues to prioritise income generation via teaching, research and knowledge exchange. Social activities and social engagement with students are usually not considered essential for promotion processes, but perhaps what such engagement can offer to academics are personal and intangible rewards. Such rewards could lead to career longevity avoiding burnout as a consequence of meaningful and practical engagement. However, this is more likely to be the case if one's involvement is recognised on one's teaching time table.

In conclusion, the authors felt as though establishing this group on the two respective campuses provided an opportunity for both student and staff engagement and collaboration. It has created an opportunity for the practical application of the theory learned within university lectures and

encouraged student group activity. Moreover, the aims of the group seem to emulate broader university development goals such as employability strategies as students were encouraged to make contacts outside of the university all the while engaging with the community and learning first-hand about the needs and how they are capable to address these.

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